

CQ

GHOST SHIP



WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Other Tommy Rockford adventures:

SOS at Midnight
DX Brings Danger
Death Valley QTH

CQ Ghost Ship!

By Walker A. Tompkins

**American Radio Relay League
Newington, CT USA 06111**

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The Amateur Radio stations appearing in this book actually exist. Any resemblance of characters herein to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

*In fond memory of
ROY GARDNER
who with his XYL June
restored "The Wreckage"
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CQ Ghost Ship!

CG Ghost Ship!

CHAPTER ONE

Detectives' Secret

Radio amateur Tommy Rockford, microphone in hand, sat sprawled behind the wheel of his parked car, chatting with a fellow ham at an Air Force base in Okinawa, some six thousand miles away.

"You say it's high noon Tuesday where you are, Tommy?" the airman's voice came distinctly from the speaker under the dash. "Thanks for reminding me. The sun's about to rise on Wednesday over here, and time I pulled the big switch on this MARS station and went to breakfast. Back for your final..."

Thumbing the push-to-talk button on his mike, Tommy put his own short-wave transmitter on the air:

"JR6JL, Okinawa, with JA4YZ in Japan standing by, this is K6ATX/7 operating mobile approaching Port Angeles, Washington State. Stand by one..."

Tommy reached into the glove compartment for his mobile station logbook. Then he resumed, "I've run into a funny situation while logging this roundtable, boys. You see, while Suki was making his transmission in Hiroshima, I was driving my car onto this big motor vessel *Coho*, which is now ferrying me across the Strait of Juan de Fuca from Victoria, Canada, to Washington State. I wish ham television were as common as ham radio... I would transmit a picture of what I'm seeing for you guys. It's as out of this world as a space shuttle, this Pacific Northwest scenery. That's including British Columbia, VE-land."

Even the restricted views Tommy had through the portholes of

the motor ferry's vehicle deck were spectacular. The Strait was over twenty miles wide between Vancouver Island and the Washington shoreline, with the snow-covered volcanic cone of Mount Baker looming to the northeast and the incomparable Olympic Mountains forming the saw-toothed skyline to the south.

For Tommy and his Uncle, "JC" Ellison of Seattle, who was the driver of the maroon station wagon squeezed in alongside Tommy's car, this hour-long cruise was a welcome respite from all the driving they had done in the past week while touring Vancouver Island and inland British Columbia. The week before that, they had driven more than a thousand miles up the coast from Tommy's home in Southern California to his uncle's place in Seattle. Now they were headed for JC's rented beach house at Ocean Park, north of the mouth of the Columbia River, where they would vacation all summer.

"Getting back to my logbook problem," Tommy chuckled, "here's the deal. Should I log myself as a 'maritime mobile' because I'm on a ship? Or am I a 'mobile at rest,' since I'm not driving my vehicle? Or would I be a 'mobile in motion' because the car is certainly moving? Any suggestions, Sarge?"

Releasing the transmit button automatically turned on Tommy's receiver again: "Just hope and pray," the Okinawa station came back instantly, "that your ferry doesn't blow a boiler, Tommy, or you'll find yourself 'aeronautical mobile' as well, hi! . . . Well, I've got to sign off, boys, so 73 and I'll see you both further down the old creek. This is JR6JL, Okinawa MARS station, clearing with JA4YZ in Japan and K6ATX/7 mobile in the US after a very pleasant QSO."

Tommy stood by to give the Okinawan a chance to acknowledge the polite "73"—radio jargon for "best regards"—from Suki Tamura, the Japanese student who had joined their ragchew half an hour before.

This was the noon hour of a midsummer day shortly before Tommy Rockford's eighteenth birthday. The forested shores of Washington State were mirrored in the gunmetal-blue waters of the strait until the Black Ball motor ferry plunged into the frothy wake of an outward-bound deep-sea tanker ship flying the Japanese flag. Tommy was reminded that if he were at home in Santa Bonita he would be pointing his ten-meter beam antenna in a Great Circle bearing toward Japan, to channel his best signal strength into Suki Tamura's receiving antenna in Hiroshima. But in an automobile, with a 100-watt rig depending on a storage battery for power and a bumper-mounted

whip antenna, Tommy knew he was doing well to have a daylight transpacific "QSO," as hams term a two-way contact.

Back on "send," Tommy resumed talking to his friend in Japan:

"To answer the questions you asked on your last transmission, Suki old man. Here we go:

"I'm the same age you are, almost eighteen. I graduated from high school in June. I'm planning to enroll as a freshman at Cal Tech in Pasadena this fall, majoring in electronic engineering. My graduation gift from my favorite uncle was this summer vacation trip to Washington State and Canada. Each of us is driving his own car, and we keep in touch along the road by amateur radio... Well, Suki old boy, it's been nice ragchewing with you, but I've got to sign clear now and get ready to disembark. Hope to work you again soon... 73 and *sayonara*, I believe you say it in Japan, hi! JA4YZ in Hiroshima, this is K6ATX/7 mobiling south of Victoria, B.C., going QRT for now."

"So rong, Tommee!" came the Japanese ham's nasal farewell, swallowed up suddenly by an excited British voice "zero-beat" to the exact frequency: "K6ATX/7! K6ATX/7! Here is ZL2NJU calling from New Zealand and standing by for you. Wot say, old man?"

Tommy groaned with frustration. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been thrilled by the opportunity to have a "DX" contact with a ham at the bottom of the world when he was using mobile equipment. But today was not ordinary—and he had something far more interesting on his mind than even a ten-thousand-mile radio contact.

It would be discourteous to ignore the ZL, so Tommy was genuinely relieved when he heard K6VRH in San Diego come back to the New Zealander. With the two in solid contact, Tommy switched off his own radio gear with a clear conscience.

Uppermost in Tommy's mind right now was Uncle JC's promise to divulge an "ultra top secret" as soon as they got back to Washington State—and the ferry at this very moment was passing a whistle buoy that marked the International Boundary Line between Canada and the United States. Tommy knew the big secret would explain why his uncle had been so insistent on their driving back north together after JC's business trip to Los Angeles. The fact that his uncle was a private detective, or special investigator, for a marine insurance company in Seattle added suspense to the guessing game.

Now that they were inside Washington waters, even though not

yet across the strait, Tommy figured that Uncle JC had no excuse for refusing to tell all.

Tommy was parked too close to his uncle's station wagon to open the door on that side, so he climbed out the driver's side and found himself at the ferry's port rail.

A murmur of feminine voices reached Tommy's ear above the ferry engines, drawing his eye to the overhanging boat deck above him where half a dozen teenage girls in sundresses and wind-whipped hair were staring down at him.

"I'm sure," giggled one, "I've seen him on TV!"

"Maybe he's a rock star traveling incognito, Shellie!"

The girls were obviously talking about him, which brought color rushing into Tommy's sun-bronzed cheeks. He was a husky athlete standing an even six feet, with shoulders to match; his tawny sun-bleached hair was thick and windblown. He was dressed in a football varsity sweater, faded blue jeans and Nike jogging shoes.

During his school years Tommy had earned block letters in the major sports, and could have anticipated a brilliant athletic career in college had he not chosen a technical school. Cal Tech would put more emphasis on laboratory work than football practice—and it was Tommy's number one ambition to star in the field of electronic research, not the gridiron. He took it for granted that by the time he was ready there would be a chance to practice his engineering skill in developing space technology. From his earliest years, he had read science fiction magazines; in his lifetime he had seen such fantasies as moon landings become fact.

Grinning up at the row of admirers overhead, Tommy removed his sunglasses and said, "Sorry, ladies, but I'm just a nondescript nobody from noplac, nohow."

Before the disappointed girls could think of a comeback, Tommy ducked from their sight and worked his way around the rear of his uncle's station wagon. He slid into the front seat beside his uncle to find that gentleman fast asleep behind the wheel.

JC—the initials stood for Julius Caesar, thanks to a father who taught Latin—was a ruggedly built, prematurely gray widower in his late forties. He wore a navy windbreaker, corduroy jeans and tennis shoes on the road. JC had had a brilliant record with Army Intelligence during the Vietnam conflict and was still a reserve officer. Professionally, he was a special investigator for the largest marine insurance

firm on the Pacific Coast, an officer who worked outside the public limelight in cooperation with the FBI, the US Coast Guard and other law enforcement agencies. To his nieces and nephews, JC had always been a mysterious and therefore glamorous figure.

Tommy poked his uncle in the ribs.

“Hey, wake up! We’re in Washington now, so start modulating.”

JC’s eyes blinked open. He jerked himself erect, peering out the spray-spattered windshield at the green shores of Washington, still several miles distant.

“The heck we are!” JC grumbled. “If you woke me up to worm any premature information out of me I’ll send you back home!”

Tommy pointed astern to the row of channel buoys.

“I let you sleep an extra two minutes, Unk. We’re south of the Canadian border now, and probably only a few fathoms above Washington mud, if you’re trying to be technical about it.”

“You’re worse than an old woman for curiosity!”

“So I’m curious. How come you’re bringing me along on this trip? Why all the hush-hush?”

Uncle JC’s grin faded. Ever since they had left Santa Bonita two weeks ago, Tommy had thought his usually jovial uncle had been worried about something. Now his expression changed to a real frown as JC leaned across Tommy to open the glove compartment and take out a detailed road map of Washington State.

“Considering that I’m your mother’s only brother,” he said as he unfolded the map on his knee, “you really don’t know much about me, do you, Tommy? That’s the penalty of being an undercover man.”

Tommy grinned proudly. “There are plenty of things even an undercover man can’t keep out of the papers, Unk. Like you solving some pretty big cases for Neptunian Marine Casualty Insurance. Dangerous cases, too, Mom says. She wishes you’d hurry up and marry that pretty widow you’re engaged to, and settle down in some safe job.”

“She’ll get her wish,” JC said, “come the first of the year, when the company promotes me to an executive vice-presidency. But as long as I’m a private eye, dodging bullets on occasion, I can’t get married.”

This was the first time Tommy could remember hearing his uncle discuss his personal life. Several years before, JC had lost his wife and young son, Wally, in a hit-and-run automobile accident. One reason why he had plunged himself so recklessly into dangerous detec-

tive assignments, the family believed, was because he was trying to wipe out the memories of that tragedy.

"But before I become a 'veep' and get myself married again," JC went on, "I've got one last case to wrap up. The most dangerous assignment of my career, I might add. Until it's in the Case Closed file at headquarters, I can't get married—or even take a vacation."

Tommy's heart skipped a beat.

"But—but I thought this was a vacation you were sharing with me, Unk! Your first vacation in ten years!"

JC Ellison shook his head.

"Nope. And here comes the big, ultra-top secret I've been promising you, Tommy. This so-called vacation trip of ours is to cover up this biggest detective job of my career. And I'm dragging you in on the deal as my partner, so help me—because I'll be needing the help of a radio expert I can trust, with my life if need be.

"The radio expert I've chosen is K6ATX—Tommy Rockford."

CHAPTER TWO

Ham Radio Partners

A delicious shudder coasted down Tommy's spine, like when he took a risky spill on his surfboard back home.

"What kind of a case, Unk? Give with the details!"

JC Ellison rolled up the car window at his elbow, as if making sure that eavesdroppers wouldn't hear what he was going to say next. It seemed oddly still with the throb of the ferry engines and the raucous racket of sea birds suddenly cut out.

"I don't want to sound corny," JC said, "but at this point I'll have to ask you to swear on your word of honor that the information I'm about to tell you won't be repeated, ever. Okay?"

Uncle JC wasn't kidding, and Tommy quietly promised to keep the information secret.

JC nodded. "Okay. First of all, this summer, so far as the world knows, I'm just a tired businessman from Seattle, trying to get away from the daily grind to do some fishing and loafing around Willapa Bay. Here it is, on the map. Memorize it well."

Tommy saw his uncle's pencil circle the legend *Willapa Bay* on a landlocked harbor in the southwestern corner of Washington, just north of the mouth of the Columbia River. JC pronounced the Indian name "Will-a-paw," with the accent on the "Will."

"But you aren't really on vacation?" Tommy prompted.

"No. I am one of a team of undercover men assigned to break up a gang of deep-sea pirates who have been causing Neptunian Insurance so many marine losses that we'll be bankrupt if they continue. We're about ready to close in on the boss gangster himself—the pirate chief, you might call him."

Tommy wasn't sure whether JC was joking or not. "Pirates?" he echoed. "In this day and age? I thought pirates went out of style with LaFitte and Captain Kidd!"

"Captain Kidd was an amateur compared with the pirate we're after, Tommy. Our pirate chief uses helicopters instead of frigates, assault rifles instead of flintlock pistols, radar and super-super high-frequency radio for communication instead of flag signals or a megaphone. That's where you and I come into the picture, by the way—the pirate gang will collapse if we cut off their communications."

Tommy felt a little dizzy; JC made the project sound so important. While JC made no pretensions to being an electronics engineer himself, he had held an Amateur Extra Class license for many years, with the call W7OE—Over Eater, the wits called him—on the air. He had the finest single-sideband mobile equipment on the market—a kilowatt transceiver—mounted under the dash of his station wagon; the controls were touching Tommy's knee now. JC didn't have the time to build his own equipment as Tommy had always done.

"First," Uncle JC went on, "let me show you FBI photos of the Captain Kidd we're after this summer." He removed a card with two color pictures on it from his wallet and handed it to Tommy. "I wonder if you recognize him?"

Tommy examined the "mug shots" carefully. Taken in color, they showed a criminal full face and profile. The face was round-cheeked, the graying hair close-cropped in Prussian style. The wide mouth was quirked at the corners in a predatory grin. The eyes were the cruelest feature—of a gooseberry-green color. On the man's left cheekbone was a small fishhook-shaped scar below a single chickenpox pit, resembling an inverted question mark. His age was somewhere in the middle forties.

Under his chin was a blackboard on which had been chalked an FBI photograph number and prison #39196685.

"Why," Tommy exclaimed, "this is the gangster they called the King of the Safecrackers, isn't it? I remember he drowned trying to escape from a maximum security institution the year I was a sophomore. Let's see, what was his name now? Blackie somebody?"

JC Ellison returned the rogue's gallery picture to his wallet.

"Blackjack Gorin, who could open the strongest safe ever built without using tools or explosives. The tabloids used to call him the safe robber with X-ray eyes because he could ferret out the secret of

a combination lock.”

Tommy said wonderingly, “But what’s Blackjack Gorin got to do with your pirate gang? He’s been dead three years.”

“So you think. And so thought everyone else until we found out that instead of drowning he made his escape. Dropped out of sight a few months, and then turned up as the mastermind behind this sea-going ring of pirates you and I are going to try to round up this summer, Tommy.”

Tommy felt butterflies holding a convention in his stomach.

“Wait a minute, now! Are you trying to tell me the two of us have to tackle Blackjack Gorin—let alone his whole gang?”

For the first time on this trip, Uncle JC broke into a hearty laugh.

“Not quite that bad, Tommy—the gang is scattered all the way from Acapulco, Mexico, to Anchorage, Alaska. What we’re after is the secret radio station at Gorin’s headquarters, where he directs the operations of his pirate ring. That radio station is believed to be somewhere in the vicinity of Willapa Bay. Get it?”

Tommy was staring unseeingly past the bow of the ferryboat, now cruising at half speed as it followed a zigzag channel toward the landing wharf at Port Angeles, still a mile distant.

“No, Unk, I don’t get it,” Tommy admitted. “I follow this much—that Gorin escaped from prison and organized this band of pirates, and that he runs his gang by radio. But how does he operate? Does he have a fleet of outlaw ships that hijack other ships at sea, as gangsters hijack trucks on the highway?”

JC shook his head. “Nothing that spectacular. To put it in a nutshell, Gorin apparently set up a sort of school for safecrackers when he got back his freedom. About all we know about Blackjack Gorin is that he served an apprenticeship in a lock factory in his youth. He had a genius for locksmithing, apparently, which he turned into criminal channels.

“Through his underworld connections, Gorin has trained other men in his secret method of opening locked doors and safety vaults and cash drawers, apparently without the use of tools, and never resorting to explosives.

“Instead of employing his graduates on land, Gorin puts them on ships bound for Hawaii or Alaska or the Panama Canal—always ships departing from West Coast ports; never the Atlantic ports. They concentrate on pursers’ safes, which carry extremely valuable plunder,

easily portable and disposable on the market, such as cash, jewelry, drugs, and the like. Each time a ship's safe is looted by a robber who leaves no clues behind—the hallmark of a Blackjack Gorin job—it seems Neptunian Insurance has to pay up.”

“All right, Unk, I follow you so far,” Tommy said. “Gorin plants his robbers on ships and they loot the pursers’ safes. But if this takes place out at sea, wouldn’t the ships’ captains search every passenger before they could disembark?”

JC smiled patiently. “That has been done in every single case, Tommy—and not one penny’s worth of loot turned up. The answer? Gorin’s henchman stows his haul in an inflatable plastic raft, which he can smuggle aboard in his luggage. He chucks this overboard within minutes after the robbery occurs. The miniature raft carries a gadget about the size of a cigarette case that emits a beep-beep signal similar to a beacon on a space satellite.”

Tommy’s heart leaped with excitement. “And Gorin has someone standing by in a seaplane or a speedboat to follow those beeps and pick up the loot. Wow!”

“Exactly. One of our Neptunian operators, working as a steward on a passenger ship to Honolulu, was lucky enough to capture one of Gorin’s safecrackers in action. A search of his stateroom turned up the collapsible raft gadget with its microscopic radio transmitter, but they couldn’t get him to squeal on Gorin’s secret method of opening safes. He did, however, talk pretty freely about the illicit radio network by which Gorin keeps in touch with his operatives up and down the coast from a well-hidden central control station.”

Tommy said, “And you think this hidden radio station is around Willapa Bay somewhere?”

“Yes. It’s taken nearly two years of work by the Federal Communications Commission to narrow it down, but those FCC boys are pretty sharp. They are also cooperative—they’ve pooled their information with private detectives like me, and with the FBI investigators.”

On the ferryboat, passengers were beginning to come down from the coffee shop to get into their cars, indicating that they were only minutes away from the landing. Neither JC Ellison nor Tommy was aware of his surroundings by now.

“The first thing a detective does when he takes on a case is to familiarize himself with the locale he’s going to be working in,” JC said. “Let’s study this map of Washington, shall we?”

"Good idea," Tommy agreed, moving closer.

"You'll notice that Willapa Bay resembles San Francisco Bay to a startling degree," JC pointed out. "The same peninsula separating the harbor from the Pacific Ocean, an entrance called Golden Gate down south, the Willapa Bar up here. But whereas San Francisco's peninsula is solid city, up here the North Beach Peninsula is just a big, long sand dune covered with timber and fresh-water lakes and cranberry bogs. It's a sand dike formed by silt the Columbia River spilled into the sea to be thrown back on shore by the tides and winds."

Tommy studied the map of North Beach Peninsula with new interest. He saw that it was about thirty miles long but only a mile wide, ending at Leadbetter Point. A state highway ran halfway up its length, connecting the small resort villages of Seaview, Long Beach, Oceanside, Klipsan and Ocean Park.

On the bay side of the peninsula were two more villages, Nahcotta and Oysterville. According to the map, the area extending inland from Willapa Bay to the Cascade mountains—a distance of roughly one hundred miles—was thinly populated and largely primitive forest area.

"Looks like an ideal spot for an illegal radio station to operate," Tommy commented. "Those islands in the middle of the Bay—Long Island and Baby Island—look like ready-made pirate hangouts, Unk."

JC nodded in agreement. "All the inland country, except around the county seat of South Bend and the lumber center of Raymond, is about as primitive as it was in the days of the Indians. These rivers with the strange Indian names, flowing into the Bay—Palix, Nemah, Naselle—tap country as full of wild animals and dense jungles of fern-brake as you'd find anywhere."

Tommy saw his uncle's pencil circle the name "Ocean Park," the most northern of the seaside towns on the peninsula.

"Here's where we're going to be setting up a short-wave monitoring station to listen for Gorin's signals," JC said. "I've leased a friend's summer place in Ocean Park for two months. You and I are going to pose as ordinary tourists, remember that. Our lives may depend on it."

"I'll remember!"

"We've got to assume that Ocean Park, pretty and peaceful as it is, may be swarming with Gorin's spies. If they catch on that we are operating a monitoring station, our lives won't be worth a blown-out fuse."

JC reached behind the seat, unlocked an attaché case, and brought forth a small, mysterious-looking piece of electronic equipment, which he handed to Tommy.

"This is a classified bit of government radio gear which you will keep locked up in your car at all times, to use when we're away from our fixed station at home," JC said. "It's the tool we're counting on to pinpoint Gorin's secret radio station, so guard it well. It was especially built for this operation."

Tommy recognized the gadget as a masterpiece of miniaturization. It was three things in one—direction finder, frequency meter and radio receiver. The antenna was a loop of silver-plated copper the size of a dollar, mounted on a 360° compass dial with a pointer to indicate the exact direction any signals were coming from. The whole thing was no larger than a half-pint milk carton, but from its weight Tommy judged it was crammed like a fruitcake with miniature electronic components.

"The FCC engineers who designed it for us call it their 'Super-Duper Snooper-Loop,' " JC went on. "It tunes to Blackjack Gorin's frequency and no other, so if he should shift to some other frequency the game would have to start all over again. Did you notice the narrow scale range on the frequency meter?"

Tommy slid a cover plate aside to reveal a tiny meter the size of a quarter and read the numerals on the dial. He could hardly believe what he saw. The range of the meter was 60,000 to 60,100 megahertz—and a megahertz meant a million cycles a second.

"Hold on, now," Tommy said. "Didn't I understand you to say that Gorin's radio station kept him in direct contact with gangsters scattered from Mexico to Alaska?"

"So our informant told us—and we believe him."

Tommy grinned. "He lied to you, Unk. It would be impossible to communicate a thousand miles or more at 60,000 megs, except of course by using space satellites or bouncing signals off the moon. But that wouldn't be reliable enough. Sixty miles, maybe, if conditions were red hot. Why, if you could do that with microwaves we'd be seeing TV programs from Europe. Gorin couldn't do it. It's impossible."

JC clucked his tongue. "That's a fine, narrow-minded, biased attitude for a future scientist to take, Tommy! Granted, it seems impossible at the present stage of the radio art. But Blackjack Gorin's

doing it—and he's so sure he won't be monitored that he even has a regular schedule for transmissions—from 2100 to 2200 hours nightly, Pacific Standard Time. That's the most important thing we learned from our informer—the schedule of Gorin's central radio station. Even so, he transmits in a code the government cryptographers haven't been able to decipher.”

All the time Uncle JC was talking, Tommy had been wagging his head in negation.

“If what you say is true,” Tommy said, “then Gorin is not only a genius at X-raying combination locks—he's an electronics genius fifty years ahead of his time! Long-range communications by microwaves—well, I still say it isn't possible. Except, of course, by relaying signals from repeater stations.”

Uncle JC sighed patiently. “I'm not qualified to argue the technical angles, Tommy. All I know is that our monitoring teams picked up strong signals at 60,080 megahertz and got a rough sort of fix on their source. Direction finders in Spokane, Salt Lake City, Boise, Reno and San Francisco all reported bearings simultaneously. Where those lines intersected, broadly speaking, was in southwestern Washington. It's up to local monitoring stations, like ours, to pinpoint the exact location. And we're pretty sure it will be somewhere in the forested area east of Willapa Bay, probably not far from the coast.”

Before Tommy could answer, the *Coho's* mighty air horn blasted its basso profundo roar to indicate that the ferryboat was about to enter the harbor of Port Angeles on the Washington side.

“We'll pick up US 101 here at Port Angeles,” JC said, “the same interstate highway that runs through Santa Bonita. We'll gas up, have a bite of lunch, then follow 101 around the western side of the Olympic Peninsula Loop, then south as far as the Columbia River. I'll be your tour guide and explain points of interest as we cruise along, so keep your ham rig tuned to 3820 kilohertz for my brilliant running commentary, Tommy.”

Tommy stowed the secret direction finder under his football sweater as he climbed out of his uncle's car. JC called after him, “We've got a leisurely six-hour drive ahead of us this afternoon, so relax and enjoy it.”

Back inside his own car, Tommy Rockford locked the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop inside his glove compartment. His hands

trembled with anticipation as he started the engine and, preceded by scores of other tourists' automobiles, drove off the deck and up the ramp behind Uncle JC's station wagon. British Columbia could hardly be called a "foreign country," but even after a week it felt good to be back on good old American soil again.

CHAPTER THREE

Unexpected Visitor

The sun was westering toward a cushion of scarlet-tinted clouds when they turned off Interstate 101 near the Columbia River and headed west with the green shores of Oregon to their left. The afternoon drive down the western coast of Washington had been one Tommy Rockford would always remember.

Driving about a mile behind Uncle JC's station wagon, K6ATX had been kept informed of scenic wonders and landmarks before he reached them: the Olympic National Rain Forest, where more than a hundred inches of rain fell annually to make it the wettest place in the United States; the Quinault Indian Reservation, one of the most beautiful in the country; the sleepy lumber-mill towns of Hoquiam and Aberdeen on Gray's Harbor, Raymond and South Bend on the Willapa River, finally skirting the eastern shoreline of lovely Willapa Bay. And now, at sundown, Uncle JC was describing landmarks along the north bank of the nine-mile-wide Columbia River, which separated Washington from Oregon—Fort Columbia, Baker's Bay, the quaint fishing village of Ilwaco, named for a Chinook Indian chief of pioneer days.

"The tide is out, so instead of taking the highway up the peninsula, we'll drive the beach up to Ocean Park," JC concluded his travelogue. "It might be a good idea to keep me in visual range from here on out, Tommy."

"Roger, Unk. Carry on. I can't wait to get to Ocean Park."

JC turned west at the first oceanside village they came to—Seaview—and led Tommy through shady forests dotted with summer houses, to emerge suddenly onto a graveled causeway which crossed

a wide strip of sand dunes the color of salt and pepper, becoming chocolate-dark and pavement hard at the ocean's edge.

With startling suddenness Tommy Rockford found himself skirting the most spectacular seascape he could remember. Row on row of tremendously high breakers rolled beachward, their exploding bursts of spray bright as quicksilver against the swollen blob of sun poised like a drop of red paint on the horizon.

He swung his car northward as JC radioed, "This is the longest beach in the world, Tommy, believe it or not. Five miles longer than Daytona Beach in Florida. You can drive nearly thirty miles from Beard's Hollow to the point of the peninsula."

The beach stretched endlessly northward into the dusk, like the converging v of a railroad track on a prairie, except that it was half a mile in width.

Hundreds of cars, most of them with out-of-state licenses, were driving on the beach. At the approach ramp leading to the peninsula's largest town, Long Beach, the chamber of commerce had erected a billboard that JC told Tommy to be sure to read:

In the bygone era of sailing ships, the beach you are now traveling was known to mariners of the 7 seas as

THE GRAVEYARD OF THE PACIFIC

As you drive along, remember that the bones of nearly 200 ghost ships are scattered along this strand, the victims of King Neptune before the advent of radio and radar. . .

The words "radio" and "radar" snapped Tommy back to reality with a start, reminding him why he and JC had come to this vacation wonderland. He stepped on the gas to catch up with his uncle.

The farther north they went from the resort center of Long Beach, the heavier the forests became. It gave Tommy the creeps, wondering if Blackjack Gorin's radio station might be hidden somewhere in those trackless wastes of underbrush.

Twelve miles of beach ticked off on Tommy's odometer before Uncle JC slowed and turned inland onto a graveled ramp leading to Ocean Park.

"Well, here we are," JC's voice came from the radio. "We'd better sign clear now and see about supper, Tommy. K6ATX/7, W7OE over off and clear."

"Roger—K6ATX/7 clear," Tommy signed off likewise.

Dropping down off the high West Dune with its Sunset Arch, Tommy saw the glimmering lights of Ocean Park's scatter of stores and residences bordering the wide main street. This sleepy little village was the spot JC had chosen for their summer headquarters. It was here that they would masquerade as vacationers instead of detectives on a dangerous, important mission.

JC swung in before a ramshackle frame building two blocks from the West Dunes. A weathered sign informed them that this was the CLAM SHELL CAFE—HUNCAN DINES HERE. ALVA & LU, PROPS.

"This is where I pick up the key to our summer cabin," JC explained. "This is also where we eat, if you like seafood."

When they emerged from the restaurant forty minutes later, full dark had come to Ocean Park. Driving south on the paved state highway, they passed the local school and baseball park. Then, JC turned toward the ocean again on an unpaved sand road that skirted a two-acre lawn dotted with alder trees, in the center of which stood a two-story log blockhouse. Their headlight beams picked out rustic letters on the front dormer spelling out THE WRECKAGE.

Tommy's hopes that this was to be their vacation home for the next couple of months were dashed, however, when JC drove on. They crossed a rumbling plank bridge that spanned a muddy slough where bullfrogs croaked deafeningly, penetrated a pitch-dark alder grove, and reached dead end on the West Dune overlooking the mile-wide beach.

Here at the end of the lane was a small shingled cottage, silvery-gray in the moonlight from years of weathering. JC's spotlight swung around to pick out the name ALDEREDGE on a row of wooden fish-net floats strung along the front porch.

"This will be our QTH, Tommy," JC called out, using the ham radio term for an operator's home. "I know you'll like it. Belongs to a baker friend of mine in Tacoma, Jack Macpherson. It's ours till the first week in September."

Tommy climbed stiffly out of his car, tired from the day-long drive up from Nanaimo, Vancouver Island, where they had spent the night. He filled his lungs with the salt air, perfumed with the spicy aroma of alders and conifers and invisible masses of wild rose bushes and Scotch broom back in the darkness.

"Very fine business, Unk," the boy said enthusiastically. "Room

enough to string up a rhombic antenna here, by golly.”

JC laughed wearily. He was already busy untying a tarp from the luggage carrier on top of his station wagon. “You and your ham talk. You eat, sleep and think radio, don’t you, kid?”

Tommy unlocked the trunk of his car and started lifting out the heavy cardboard boxes in which he had packed enough gear for a fixed ham station. “I wouldn’t be along on this trip,” he reminded his uncle gaily, “if I *wasn’t* a ra—”

He broke off at the low-voiced command from his uncle, wanting to bite off his tongue as he realized his slip. JC did not say anything until they reached the cottage porch. Then JC whispered while he unlocked the front door, “Don’t make me sorry I brought you along as my partner, Tommy. You’ve simply *got* to school yourself not to make comments like that one. This isn’t a movie script we’re acting out, you know, it’s for real, and for keeps. Ocean Park could be crawling with Blackjack Gorin’s spies for all we know. And if they ever suspected a radio monitoring station was setting up for business in this cottage—good-bye!”

Tommy felt as miserable as a whipped puppy.

“Sorry, Unk. It won’t happen again.”

JC unlocked the door and snapped a wall switch. They saw a neat, sparsely furnished living room in knotty pine, with Prestolog and pitch-pine kindling stacked in a rock fireplace, ready to light. Alderedge was a typical summer home—simple, furnished with odds and ends, and altogether wonderful.

“You take the southwest bedroom, where you can hear the ocean through the west windows,” JC said. “It’s like a lullaby on a pipe organ—different from the ocean down your way, with a breaker rolling in once or twice every minute.”

Tommy unloaded his HW-5400 ham transceiver on a table by the front window and walked over to touch a match to the kindling wood in the fireplace, more to see the cheerful flames than for any need to dispel the night chill. He enjoyed nothing quite so much as a crackling open fire.

“You can set up station K6ATX at the window table if you want,” JC went on. “I don’t care what kind of a ham antenna you string up outside. Our 60,080 megahertz monitoring antenna is a rotating parabolic dish which we’ll put in the attic where nobody—especially visiting members of the ham community—will see it and ask

embarrassing questions.”

A few more trips to and from their cars, and the two were ready to unpack for the summer. Characteristically, Tommy took time out to attach a random length of wire to the antenna terminals of the HW-5400, tuning to the forty-meter CW, or Morse Code, band.

His reason for bringing extra gear along on this trip was for working phone patches to his parents in Santa Bonita by way of stations belonging to his ham pals Doc, K6CRJ, Roy, W6AMD, and Spud, WA6IBR. It saved writing letters, too.

“Now here’s the deal, Tommy,” his uncle said when Tommy joined him in a back bedroom. “We don’t start officially monitoring Gorin’s wavelength until next Monday. Then we relieve the boys at our listening post at Gray’s Harbor, north of here. Until then you can fish, loaf, swim—anything you want.”

“Sounds great.”

“Tomorrow early,” JC went on to say, “I’ll drive up to Aberdeen to confer with our monitors. I’ll check 3820 kilohertz every hour on the hour while I’m on the road, in case you want to give me a shout for any reason while I’m away.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Two days at the most. Meanwhile, you just—”

JC broke off as a knock sounded on the front door—four quick raps, followed by a pause and then two more raps. It was Morse code for Hi, the universal greeting of radio amateurs.

Their eyes met. “Company already?” Tommy whispered.

“I’m expecting nobody, officially or otherwise. Must be a radio ham spotted our call-letter license plates. Hope he isn’t a night-blooming type of pest. Go see.”

“Roger,” Tommy muttered, and then called in a loud voice for whoever was at the door, “QRX one!”—assuming that anyone who tapped out the Morse letters for “Hi” would know that QRX one was hamese for “stand by one moment.”

After a quick look around to make sure none of their crates of secret radio gear were in evidence, JC gave Tommy the nod, which sent him into the front room to the door.

Pausing to switch on the porch light for their visitor, Tommy swung the door wide open, saying, “Hi yourself!”

And then his voice trailed off in sheer astonishment at what he saw waiting at the threshold.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Weird Beachcomber

The gnomelike old man who stood on the Alderedge porch was something straight out of a Disney movie. He wore a pair of aviation goggles atop his onion-bald pate, and a scraggly, snow-white beard hung like bleached seaweed from his jaw. The eyes peering up at Tommy from deep sockets overhung with thorny white brows were spark-blue, vital and saucy.

He wore a ragged mackinaw and a patched pair of olive-drab army pants of ancient vintage, and leather puttees of the same era showed above the rolled-down hip boots he was wearing. He stood with both arms behind him as if hiding something. In the background at the edge of the porch light stood a dilapidated-looking side-car motorcycle, apparently the old man's conveyance.

"Greetings on behalf of Ocean Park, home of the world-famous razor clam," the incredible scarecrow announced in a senile but ebullient voice. "I'm yer neighbor from t'other side of the slough, the log cabin. Folks call me the Beachcomber, which name's as good as any, I reckon. Happened to be passin' on my 'cycle, seen a light in your window . . ."

Tommy could only stare. The "Beachcomber" was well named. He not only looked the part, but smelled of kelp and salt and fish. Even his voice reminded Tommy of a seagull's squawk.

"Don't keep our guest standing there, Tommy," JC called out.

Tommy blushed a deep crimson. "Oh—sure. Come right in, Mr. Beachcomber. My uncle and I just got in from Canada and were busy unpacking, so we didn't hear your motorcycle stop outside. We didn't expect visitors so—"

He broke off again, realizing how inhospitable he sounded every time he opened his mouth. He stepped aside as the old-timer came in, chuckling behind his beard at Tommy's discomfiture.

"I know, son, yer both tired from a long day's drivin', so I won't stay long. Just wanted to bring you a mess o' clams."

As he spoke, the Beachcomber's scrawny arms came out from behind his body and he handed Tommy a shallow cardboard box containing a score or more of live razor clams, their golden-brown shells contrasting vividly with their snow-white necks and diggers.

"We got a string of minus tides this week," the Beachcomber said over a handshake with JC. "I just got in off the beach. Clams practically crawl into the surf bucket on these minus tides. They make the finest fritters an' chowder in the world, bar none."

JC nodded emphatic agreement.

"So I've been telling my nephew here. I'm Ellison, from Seattle, and this is Tommy Rockford, from California. Brought him up here to see what real fishing and swimming can be."

After shaking hands with Tommy, the Beachcomber took a briar pipe out of his tattered mackinaw pocket and poked the curved stem into the orifice behind his thicket of whiskers. Going over to the fireplace, he squatted down before the crackling fire, plucked a blazing splinter out of the logs, and got his pipe going.

"Like I said, I won't be stayin'," the old-timer said. "Just got off the beach, seen lights in Alderedge, says to myself, 'These folks might enjoy a mess o' clams.' " The old man got stiffly to his feet and, his gaze suddenly falling upon Tommy's ham equipment over at the window table, headed in that direction. "Nice-lookin' hearin' aid you got here, folks. Reckon you'll have some fine business QSOs back home while you're here."

JC and Tommy exchanged startled glances. This old-timer was talking pure ham jargon when he said "hearing aid" for a receiver and "fine business QSO" for a two-way contact on the air.

"What's your ham call, sir?" Tommy asked politely.

The Beachcomber turned to face them, a ribbon of smoke seeping through his stained beard.

"I ain't a ham, Tommy. I wouldn't know a dot from a dash if I caught 'em floatin' in my soup. But my log cabin is a kind of community gatherin' place for Ocean Park teenagers durin' the winter months when there ain't much to do, and quite a few are radio

amateurs. Keep pesterin' me to run electricity to The Wreckage and get me a radio ticket, but I tell 'em I'm too blamed old."

The speaker on the table behind the Beachcomber suddenly gave out with a burst of high-speed CW, or continuous-wave, radio telegraph code. Tommy and Uncle JC, copying the signals automatically, quickly learned that K9CH, John, in Muncie, Indiana, was working break-in with a VE3 in Canada on forty meters.

Tommy said, "Age doesn't count, Mr. Beachcomber. There must be over four hundred thousand licensed radio amateurs in this country, and they run all the way from seven to seventy-seven years old."

The old man chuckled. "Reminds me, I'm givin' the PARK gang—that's the Peninsula Amateur Radio Klub—a big clam feed over at my log cabin tomorrow afternoon. Be glad to have you gentlemen drop in, right after the fox hunt."

Against the radio's background of high-speed Morse code, Tommy said excitedly, "You mean a transmitter hunt? Say, I wonder if they'd let a visitor from six-land join in on it? I brought along my ten-meter loop, just in case."

Uncle JC commented, "Maybe the local radio club doesn't operate its hidden transmitter on ten meters, Tommy. Do you know their operating frequency, Mr. Beachcomber?"

The old man hobbled back to the fireplace to relight his pipe. "I don't know what frequency you're talkin' about, Mr. Ellison, but I know the hidden transmitter starts talkin' at nine o'clock sharp, somewhere on the peninsula—nobody knows where. His call is W7RDR and his name is Lyle Stark."

Unconsciously Tommy's ears were copying the rapid flow of *dits* and *dahs* from the speaker across the room. Occasional crashes of static, of a different quality from what Tommy had heard before, blotted out the CW from time to time.

As if reading his thoughts, the Beachcomber said, "That crashin' an' cracklin' you hear, the boys tell me that's the Aurora Bory-Alice actin' up. Up here this far north, 46° 30' we are, you can hear as well as see the Northern Lights. Sure play hob with ham radio an' TV, though."

Uncle JC, anxious to get to bed, informed the Beachcomber that he and Tommy were grateful for the mess of clams, and that they would attend the ham gang's clambake at The Wreckage the next day if they could possibly arrange it.

The Beachcomber, however, failed to take the hint.

"You'll want to see my log cabin an' my maritime museum," he rambled on. "I named it The Wreckage because ever' stick an' brick come offn the beach. Flotsam an' jetsam courtesy of King Neptune—that's how I built my blockhouse. Even split the roof shakes from cedar bolts with a froe."

Tommy Rockford's face radiated a new interest in their colorful old visitor. "Why, I saw a film clip about you and The Wreckage once, on television!" he exclaimed. "You got the logs from a lumber mill's raft that broke up on the Columbia River bar during a bad storm. The fireplace bricks were ballast from a ship that went aground on the peninsula—"

The Beachcomber came to his feet and pulled down his goggles. Tommy noticed that his head seemed to be cocked at a slight angle, as if he were listening to the Morse code that was crackling from the HW-5400's speaker across the room.

"Yep, the TV folks took pitchers of me and my Wreckage museum," the old man admitted. "Well, I'll be traipsin' along. Be glad to loan you a clam gun if you want to dig yourselves a mess on tomorrow night's tide. I aim to be neighborly, and makin' a dern pest of myself the first night ain't a good start."

Tommy made no move to follow the old man to the door, where Uncle JC shook his hand warmly. Shuffling out the doorway, the Beachcomber paused a moment, the porch light's highlights and shadows on his face making him look like a Biblical patriarch.

"Well, so long for now, and 73, as my radio ham friends always say. Hope you enjoy yourselves this summer. You couldn't find a better spot for a vacation, I can tell you that."

Uncle JC stood in the doorway watching the old man hobble wraithlike to the side-car motorcycle, straddle it, grip the handlebars, kick the starting crank, and roar off in a thunder of exhaust to disappear down the alder grove lane beyond the slough bridge.

"Great Scott, did you ever see such a character?" JC laughed, shutting the door against the organ-tone roar of the surf and the receding put-put of the Beachcomber's motorcycle. "I've heard of that old duffer for years, but never ran into him face to face before."

Tommy did not answer. Scowling, he walked over to the table and then, a troubled frown between his eyes, switched off the receiver for the night.

"Do you realize, Tommy," JC was saying, "we don't even know the old codger's name? Surely he couldn't have been christened B—" JC broke off, staring at his husky young nephew with sudden concern. "What's the matter, Tommy—our seafood disagree with you? You're so pale you're green."

Tommy's blue eyes were troubled as they met his uncle's anxious gaze. He swallowed hard and grinned sheepishly.

"Unk, you'll think I'm nuts, but—you remember you said we might run into Gorin's spies anywhere?"

JC nodded. "Sure, but if you're suspicious of the Beachcomber, forget it. You're letting your imagination get the best of you—before we've even started."

A knot of muscle hardened at the corners of Tommy's jaws.

"Unk, the Beachcomber said he couldn't read code."

"So what? Most people can't."

"But he's lying. He *does* read code—high speed code. Why should he lie to us about it—unless he was here to spy on our secret monitoring station and wanted to play dumb?"

JC's eyes sharpened. "What makes you think he can copy Morse? You aren't a mind reader. Just because he was listening to that VE3 yakking with that guy in Indiana doesn't mean he was copying the signals."

Tommy said adamantly, "But he *was* reading the signals, as solid as you and I were in our heads. He was standing between me and that wall lamp, Unk. That threw his profile into silhouette—and through his whiskers I could see his lips plainly."

"Yes?" JC was definitely interested now.

"When that code was rapping along the fastest, around forty words per minute, I saw the Beachcomber's lips forming each word as it came over the air. Not letter by letter, but word by word, the way a CW expert would. You couldn't see his lips moving, ever so slightly, because his whiskers covered them from where you stood. The old man was reading that code—probably without even being aware his lips were moving."

For a long moment there was no sound in the cottage's living room except the crackle of the dying fire in the hearth and the remote moan of the surf.

"Tommy," Uncle JC finally broke the silence, "I think we're both overtired, keyed up. I'll find out tomorrow what the FBI may

have on the Beachcomber, but he isn't my idea of a Blackjack Gorin spy."

JC ended with a chuckle, but Tommy noticed that the mirth did not reach his uncle's eyes. They held the same worried look that they had driving up from California and Canada the past two weeks. JC, whose life was at stake in this job, was disturbed. It was right there in his eyes for Tommy to see.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Nervous Novice

Tommy went to bed well after midnight, having stayed up to help Uncle JC install the microwave monitoring gear in the attic by way of a trapdoor concealed in a clothes closet. But tired as he was, Tommy found his nerves too keyed-up for sleep. When he did doze off, dreams plagued his slumbers.

Sunlight streaming through his bedroom window roused him at five o'clock the next morning, to his disgust. He got up, tiptoeing so as not to rouse JC, only to discover that his uncle had already left in the station wagon for Aberdeen and his conference with the FCC monitors they were to relieve.

JC Ellison had left a note taped to the bathroom mirror:

Tommy: Not a bite to eat in the house except raw clams, so you'd better have breakfast in town. Have fun. Don't swim in the ocean except on incoming tide. The undertow is worse here than in Calif. Will monitor 3820 kHz hourly.

A fine thing, Tommy told himself as he showered, waking up at dawn when I get a chance to sleep late.

He took time out to mount his auxiliary direction-finding loop antenna on his car, in case the local hams let him join today's hidden transmitter hunt. Ferreting out concealed stations is one of the most popular sports indulged in by American radio hams. Tommy's own skill at the game was one reason why JC had selected him to help pinpoint Blackjack Gorin's illegal station on 60,080 megahertz.

A walk down the beach as far as the old Lifesaving Station at

Klipsan, and back to Alderedge, took him until seven o'clock. Figuring that by this time he might find a restaurant open, Tommy got in his car and set forth. Except for a plume of white smoke curling from the chimney of The Wreckage log cabin, he saw no signs that the Beachcomber was up and stirring.

Tommy discovered upon his arrival at the Clam Shell Cafe that it had been open all night. He was the only customer at the counter, and the two attractive young matrons who ran the daytime shift were lifelong residents of the village.

"Ocean Park's a friendly place," Lucille Wickburg assured him when she delivered his second stack of pancakes. "Only way you can rile us is to start bragging about your California sunshine. We can't help it if it rains so much up here we've got webbed feet!"

Tommy laughed. "People are sure friendly, all right. We had hardly unpacked last night when a motorcycle messenger delivered a mess of fresh-dug clams."

Alva Slagle, the comely blonde at the cash register, said "The Beachcomber, of course. Our one-man chamber of commerce. The tourists adore him and his whiskers. He's our local atmosphere."

"Loco atmosphere, you'd say in California," Lucille added.

"Interesting old guy," Tommy agreed. "Where's he from?"

Lucille shrugged. "Nobody knows. He's been here since before I was born, put-putting in his motorbike up and down the beach, scavenging anything worth the picking up. Have you seen his ghost-ship museum yet?"

Tommy, careful not to seem too interested, shook his head.

"Only from the outside. I understand it's fabulous, though."

Lucille and Alva agreed with him on that score.

"You'll hear folks say the Beachcomber is a lunatic," Alva commented, "but personally I think he could run circles around a lot of his critics. Ocean Park's had a long-standing feud with the folks down at Long Beach, who're agitating to get the peninsula name changed from North Beach to Long Beach, and the Beachcomber is our champion debater. Nobody knows more than he does about the ship-wrecks along this coast—more than two hundred of 'em. He's got relics from most of our ghost ships in the Wreckage museum."

"I'll pay him a visit today," Tommy said. "I'm s—"

At that moment Tommy's ears caught a familiar deep-throated roar of a twin-tailpiped, dual-carburetor engine being started up out

front, revved up, and thrown into gear.

With a yell of alarm, Tommy jumped off the stool and leaped to the street window. He was in time to see his beloved low-slung automobile, its rear wheels spinning violently, as an unidentified driver headed it at breakneck speed across Ocean Park's hundred-foot-wide main street.

"My car!" Tommy yelled. "Somebody's stealing my car. . . "

Utterly flabbergasted by the enormity of the crime, Tommy stood staring as his car skidded on two wheels past Sprague's plumbing shop and disappeared up Vernon Avenue, northbound.

"Leave your keys in the ignition?" Alva Slagle inquired blandly.

Tommy thrust a hand in his pocket. For the first time since he had owned a car he had committed the unpardonable blunder of leaving the key in the ignition.

Whirling to face the two women, Tommy groaned, "Where's your phone? I've got to call the police. I—I've got a lot of expensive radio gear in that heap of mine."

Including, he remembered with a shock, the FCC's secret microwave direction finder, locked in the glove compartment. What if the auto thief was one of Blackjack Gorin's gangsters and discovered that electronic gadget, its dial marked with the frequency used by Gorin's secret radio station?

Alva Slagel replied "Our phone isn't working. Lu, we've simply got to get Norm Howerton up here to fix it."

Lucille, seeing that Tommy was about to explode, said "There's a public booth at the post office, a block up the street."

"Thanks!" Tommy jerked open the door and bolted down the cafe steps—to collide head-on with someone on the way in. Both went sprawling on the plank sidewalk.

For a horrified moment Tommy lay there, staring at his victim. She was a slim, brown-eyed girl of seventeen or so with a gorgeous suntan and a raven-black ponytail.

She was wearing a cheerleader's sweater bedecked with felt letters reading GLENDORA UNION HIGH SCHOOL. On the sweater collar was a gold pin of some kind that had given Tommy's cheek a scratch—the only casualty resulting from their collision.

"Oh—I'm terribly sorry, miss!" Tommy apologized, helping the girl to her feet. "But somebody just stole my car, and—"

The girl brushed the dust off her black, calf-length slacks with

dignity. She straightened her sweater. Then she said, "If you mean that nice-looking car with the K6ATX plates, it wasn't stolen; it was just borrowed. Take my word for it."

Tommy's jaw gaped. "You mean you know the thief?"

From the door of the cafe behind them came Lucille Wickburg's amused drawl. "Simmer down, California boy. If it was Noisy Noyce who drove off in your bucket of bolts, he'll be back directly. He's hipped on sports cars. Nobody else would have the nerve to drive off in broad daylight."

"That's right," the brunette said. "He's absolutely incorrigible. Even so, I love him like I would a brother."

Tommy pressed both palms against his throbbing temples.

"How mixed up can I get?" he moaned. "If that kid wrecks my car, or kills somebody, my insurance wouldn't cover me . . ."

His words trailed off. He had just identified the nature of the gold pin on the brunette's collar. It was not a fraternity pin indicating that she was going steady with some college man, but a ham radio call—K6ZNT. The numeral six stood for California—the United States having been cut up into ten amateur radio call zones.

"Hey—I see you're going with a radio ham!" Tommy exclaimed, momentarily forgetting about his car. "You're from California?"

Her smile was dazzling.

"Right—Glendora, east of LA. And let me put you right—I'm not going with anybody. This pin is mine. There happen to be several thousand female hams in the USA, you know, and I'm one of 'em. King Six Zipper Nipper Tipper. My handle is Trudy."

Tommy's smile was also dazzling. "Say, my name's Tommy. I sure never expected to run into such a pretty YL as you."

"How's that, young man?" an elderly voice interrupted Tommy. "Did I understand you to say my granddaughter was pretty wild?"

Tommy turned to see an elderly man alighting from a sedan that sported California license plates and a ham antenna. Trudy threw back her head and howled with mirth.

"Tommy wasn't insulting me, Gramps," she finally managed to get out. "He said I was a pretty YL, which of course is pure blarney. A YL is ham talk for 'young lady,' Gramps, and I'll be an ex-YL when and if I marry—an XYL. Males are called OM, Old Man, no matter how old or young they are."

The oldster shook hands with Tommy. "Just kidding. I'm Billy

Pearson, the local postmaster, and Trudy's chaperone summers. Uh—did Noisy Noyce commandeer your automobile just now, Tommy?"

"He did," Tommy said, his anger kindling afresh. "When I lay hands on him . . . Who is he, anyway? The village delinquent?"

Billy Pearson smiled paternally. "Noisy is Ocean Park's one and only juvenile problem. His mother died when he was six—he's twelve now—and his stepfather is an alcoholic. Here in Ocean Park we try to overlook Noisy's escapades, hoping he'll straighten out before he gets into serious trouble. He's got good blood in him. He's just insatiably curious about things."

Tommy couldn't gaze on K6ZNT's cheerful face and keep his temper at boiling point for long.

"Did—did I hear someone say your handle was Trudy?" he asked.

She nodded. "I'm sorry. It's Trudy Galt. Gramps and I were just arriving for a bite of breakfast before I drive him down to Ilwaco to shop. If you would care to join us?"

"Sure would—I'm hungry enough to gnaw the label off a can of beans," Tommy said eagerly, to the astonishment of Alva and Lucille, who had personally watched him devour no less than ten pancakes. "I owe you a treat for bumping you onto the—"

At that instant Tommy saw his car turn the corner off Vernon Avenue, skid past the Literary Pirate's book shop and come to a gravel-spraying halt in front of Trondsen's Grocery across the street. The driver promptly hunched down out of sight.

His breakfast invitation forgotten, Tommy started forward, jaw outthrust grimly. Trudy Galt plucked at his sleeve to stop him.

"I know you're angry and I don't blame you," she said with gentle earnestness. "But please don't be too severe with Noisy. He's a terrible pest, but he means well. Please, Tommy?"

"Yeah—go easy on the kid, won't you?" Gramps Pearson pleaded.

The anger slowly simmered down in Tommy's eyes before the pleading in Trudy's brown ones.

"Well . . . oh, all *right*, all right! But I'm sure going to read the riot act to him, for his own good, I can tell you."

Breaking into a jogtrot, Tommy headed across the street toward his car. This brash young borrower of strangers' automobiles must not be allowed to think he could get away with it as easily as that. No matter how innocent his motives, if he didn't have a driver's license

his joyride constituted a serious misdemeanor, even if he had had the car owner's permission.

Tommy fully expected to see Noisy Noyce leap from the car and take off like a scared rabbit, but this was not the case. When Tommy jogged to a halt beside the sports car, it was to find the interloper hunkered down on the floorboards. He wasn't hiding, however. He was busily absorbed in the intriguing pastime of twisting the knobs and dials on Tommy's homemade mobile transceiver.

"Ahem!" Tommy announced himself in as gruff a tone as he could muster. He leaned his elbows on the window ledge and screwed his face into a righteously indignant frown. "Just who are you, may I ask?"

The boy looked up—and instantly erased the last vestige of anger from Tommy's heart. He found himself looking into a boy's face with a man's oldness stamped there by past suffering. A pair of sad brown eyes like a cocker spaniel's, totally innocent of guile. His cheeks were gaunt and hollowed, but sun-bronzed; his clothes were hand-me-downs, clean-laundered but shabby.

"Me?" Noisy Noyce answered. "I'm the Extra Nervous Novice. Are you Alfa Tango X-ray?"

CHAPTER SIX

Transmitter Hunt

Before Tommy Rockford could even nod, Noisy continued, "You've sure got a fine business set of wheels here. Something I've always wanted to do is drive a job with two carburetors and chrome tailpipes and stuff, and now I've done it. Man oh man!"

Tommy went back to his frowning. "How old are you?"

The boy turned back to his inspection of the radio gear.

"Twelve goin' on thirteen. How do you work this converter?"

"Noisy," Tommy said through his teeth, "let me see your driver's license."

The boy shook his head. "Ain't got one. Too young."

"Then why did you drive my car without asking me?"

Noisy straightened up and hitched himself into a bent-over position on the seat.

"Because you left it parked with the keys in the ignition, and anybody that careless deserves to have his car taken. Right?"

Before Tommy could think of a rebuttal for such logic, Noisy prattled on. "Besides, you shouldn't put temptation in my way like that, ATX. I told the Devil to get behind me, like my mother taught me to do, and the Devil did, only he gave me a push, right behind the wheel."

"Oh, brother!"

Noisy reached down to snap a switch on the transmitter, saying "I've figured out how to do everything but turn on your converter, ATX. I'd like to scan the ten-meter band."

Appalled by this brash kid's audacity, Tommy reached down to turn off the rig.

"It is against radio laws," he shouted in Noisy's ear, "for anyone but a licensed operator to even flip the switch of a transmitter. Did you know that?"

Noisy's old-young face lighted triumphantly. Reaching in the breast pocket of his T-shirt he drew out a shabby leather wallet, from which he removed a dog-eared folded piece of light-yellow piece of paper that Tommy instantly recognized as an FCC amateur radio operator's license.

"I've held a Novice class ham ticket for six months now," Noisy announced loftily. "My call letters are KA7XNN—Xtra Nervous Novice. I've already worked twenty-two states, includin' Alaska and Hawaii—and I've got QSL cards to prove it. My rig runs ten watts to a windom antenna and my receiver is a—"

Tommy broke in frantically, "Wait, wait, wait! Your having a Novice license still doesn't qualify you to operate my rig on the ten-meter phone band. Novices are restricted to code operation only, and—"

"Soon as I study up on my theory a little more I'm taking my General Class exam," Noisy interrupted, carefully stowing his license back in his pocket. "It only takes thirteen words a minute on code, and I can copy twenty in my head. When I get my General class license, then you'll let me operate your rig, huh?"

It was beginning to dawn on Tommy Rockford that this precocious twelve-year-old, the motherless stepson of Ocean Park's most disreputable citizen, was winning their battle of words.

Jerking open the door, Tommy shoved the kid over to the other side of the seat and moved in to join him.

A sigh of relief escaped Noisy's good-natured lips. "I was afraid for a minute you were going to kick me out of the car," he confessed. "What are you going to do? Take me to jail for auto theft, like happened to my Dad once? Matter of fact Dad's roosting in the pokey down at Ilwaco right now, servin' ten days on a fragrancancy charge."

"Vagrancy," Tommy corrected him. "Boy, anybody with as much gall as you've got—stealing cars, monkeying with radio gear! Bro-ther! Ham radio doesn't have room for lids like you, Noisy Noyce."

The urchin did not appear to be listening. When Tommy had finished, he inquired with a disarming grin, "I didn't get your handle, Old Man. I know you come from California, on account of the six

in your call, but what's your handle?"

K6ATX rolled his eyes heavenward and gave up.

"Tommy. In code you always give your name twice, so I had to quit using 'Tom' because they always came back 'Tomtom.' "

Noisy nodded. "Fine business. Quebec Tango Romeo, Tommy?"

"Huh?" A red tide began crawling up K6ATX's neck. "QTR?"

Noisy had just given him one of the International Q-code symbols, a system of three-letter signs beginning with Q that had universal meanings, enabling Eskimo or Hottentot, Englishman or Chinaman to converse via ham radio with complete understanding.

Tommy had been a licensed amateur since the age of twelve, and thought he knew all the Q signals. Some of them, such as QRS for "send slower," QRM for "interference," QSB for "fading," QRX for "stand by"—these had become part of his everyday speech, both on and off the air. But with QTR, Noisy had him stumped.

"You mean QRT, of course," Tommy said. "That means 'stop,' and I wish you would."

"I mean QTR," Noisy insisted archly. "In layman's language, what is the exact time, please?"

Blushing to the roots of his hair, Tommy made an unnecessarily long chore of shooting up the cuff of his football sweater to get at his wristwatch, hoping Noisy would not notice his confusion. "QTR, sure. It's 0844, Pacific Standard Time—sixteen minutes to nine."

Noisy bit a fingernail thoughtfully.

"No time to take you over to my shack and show you the eighty-meter CW rig I built, then. We can do that when we get back."

"Get back?" Tommy echoed. "Where are we going? And why haven't we got time?"

Noisy said patiently, "My hamshack is over at Nahcotta, which is a mile east of here, on the bay. Waygart Brothers let Dad and me live under their cannery."

"You're living alone while your father's—uh—away?"

Noisy averted his eyes. Tommy sensed that discussing his parent was a tender spot with the boy and instantly regretted bringing up the matter.

"Mom died when I was a kid, and Dad—he's my stepfather really—he raised me."

"So Trudy told me."

"Anyway," Noisy went on, "if you an' me are going on the

PARK hidden transmitter hunt, we better get started. The hams have already scattered, and the hidden transmitter will make his first transmission at nine sharp."

Tommy found himself turning on the ignition. Glancing across the street toward the Clam Shell Cafe, he caught sight of Postmaster Billy Pearson and his granddaughter Trudy Galt seated at a booth by the window, watching the outcome of his conference with the auto thief. At his wave, both Trudy and her grandfather relaxed with broad grins of relief.

"I'm supposed to be having breakfast with K6ZNT and the postmaster," Tommy said. "Why am I yakking with you, I wonder?"

Noisy chuckled. "On account of my pixie personality, Trudy says. She's a honey, ain't she? But don't get ideas. I've got her staked out for my girl."

Tommy laughed in spite of himself. He backed out into the street and headed the car toward the beach.

"How long have you known Trudy?"

"Long as I can remember. Her folks spend the winter in California, summers up here. Trudy stays upstairs over the post office with Gramps and Mrs. Pearson. She's as cute as a brand-new kilowatt Kenwood rig, ain't she?"

"How long," Tommy asked casually, "will she be around Ocean Park?"

"Till Labor Day; then she's heading back home. Aims to enter Pasadena City College."

For some unaccountable reason Tommy felt his heart jump. His own college, Cal Tech, was also in Pasadena! Hmmmm.

"Let's get started, huh?" Noisy suggested. "I got a hunch the hidden transmitter will be up at Haunted Fort, at the Point. If we're the first ones to find him we'll win the prize. I understand it's going to be a Bird wattmeter."

Tommy got the car rolling down the street. He had the strange feeling that Noisy was driving, not he. The Nervous Novice, he had to admit to himself, was not only the most obstreperous urchin he had ever met, but one of the most personable, and certainly one of the brightest.

A few moments later they were driving down the graveled causeway that led to the half-mile-wide beach. During the night the tides had repaved the natural freeway as far as they could see.

Noisy gestured for Tommy to turn north, toward the point of the peninsula, immediately after which he stopped gesturing and began talking. He prefaced his vocal marathon by modestly claiming to be a man of few words, but he used those words over and over again. He gave Tommy the illusion that he could talk not only on the outflow, but on the intake of breath. What was more, he skipped from topic to topic with the rapidity of a stick rattling along a picket fence.

"A Wells Fargo stagecoach used to travel this beach with the mail to Oysterville . . . Ocean Park started out as a Methodist camp-meetin' ground . . . We got twenty-two licensed hams on the peninsula, not bad? Today's transmitter hunt will be on a frequency of 29,550 kilohertz, so tune in your receiver now . . .

"Keep an eye on that big seagull yonder. Swoopin' down to grab up a big crab. He'll fly up in the air and drop it to bust the shell and you'll see a hundred other gulls swoop in to catch it on the bounce. Did you know our oysters grow big as hub caps?

"Trudy monitors the local net freq at home. She's got a Kenwood TS-430S rig at Gramps Pearson's. She works mobile, too. Watch out for that big, rusty, iron boiler you see stickin' out of the sand up ahead, Tommy. That's all that's left of the wreck of the steam schooner *Caoba*. She came ashore in 1925, and when a rumrunner came inside the three-mile limit to save her crew the Coast Guard captured the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em."

Showing no signs of running down verbally, Noisy pointed out the hulk of a wooden sailing ship, the *Solano*, sunk to her scuppers in the soft sand to their right, some five miles north of Ocean Park, halfway to the Point. Noisy went on to say that he was in the seventh grade, that his best friend was the old Beachcomber everybody made fun of behind his back, and that it was the Beachcomber who had given him a used SW-7800 ham receiver for Christmas two years back so he could get started as an SWL, or short-wave listener.

"I couldn't stand sitting there listening to you hams yakking and not be able to talk back," Noisy admitted candidly, "so I borrowed a *Tune in the World* from W7TYB—Dick, who runs the variety store in town—and boned up on radio theory, and learned the code from station W1AW, and—"

Tommy cut in for the first time since they had left Ocean Park, because he had a "loaded" question. "Why didn't the Beachcomber teach you the code, Noisy?"

The boy's answer dashed Tommy's hopes of proving his theory of last evening—that the eccentric old-timer was lying when he said he didn't know a dot from a dash. "Beachcomber never learned how himself. Anyhow I learned the five words a minute for my Novice exam easy enough. How fast are you with a key, Tommy?"

"Around thirty-five words a minute with a keyer."

Noisy whistled his approval. "Lucky you weren't asked what QTR meant on your FCC examination, eh? QTR, Tommy?"

Not to be caught twice in the same trap, Tommy consulted his watch. "According to my digital display—which the government observatory consults when they check on WWV—it's nine o'clock on the button."

Noisy shivered with excitement. Tommy had already turned on the receiver, dialing the ham club frequency of 29,550 kilohertz, on which today's hidden transmitter would be operating.

"RDR's about ready for his first transmission, then," Noisy said, advancing the volume control on the receiver at his knees. Through the hiss and crackle of static—much of which, Tommy was to learn, was generated by the ocean surf so close at hand—the boys caught the sound of a modulated carrier.

"That handle yonder," Tommy said, "operates my ten-meter rotatable direction-finding loop. I'll let you operate it, Noisy. When a signal is the loudest the arrow's pointing at the transmitter—"

With a snorted "I know that, stupid," Noisy rotated the outside loop antenna which Tommy had installed before breakfast this morning. The voice on the frequency got louder and louder until it filled their ears as a "Q5," or loud, clear signal:

"... functioning this morning as the hidden transmitter for the Peninsula Amateur Radio Klub, Incorporated. This an authorized emergency preparedness drill, and all licensed radio amateurs in the area are invited to participate. This is W7RDR standing by for calls from any and all contestants.

"Let's go, gang—the hunt is on! May the best ham win!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sinister Signals

Both boys leaned down to peer through the windshield to check the direction of the “null” indicated by the loop when W7RDR’s volume was the loudest. It was almost due east.

“Must be hidden in Oysterville, on the bay,” Noisy Noyce said, his voice heavy with disappointment. “Looks like my hunch that he was in the Pillbox of Haunted Fort was wrong, because that’s north of us several miles yet.”

At that moment they were passing a swinging curve of deep tire ruts in the sand leading to the graveled ramp of the Oysterville approach. Tommy remembered from his study of a tide book road map of the peninsula last night that this was the last chance to get off the beach this side of Leadbetter point—and the tide book had warned tourists never to venture into the quicksand desert which formed the tip of the peninsula, for fear of losing an automobile over a tide.

Noisy waved him on, however. Picking up Tommy’s mike, the boy said “W7RDR, this is K6ATX/7. Can you see the ocean?”

The hidden transmitter snapped, “Will the visiting station from California explain why a Novice is operating on ten meters contrary to FCC regulations? I know your voice, KA7XNN.”

Tommy snatched the mike from Noisy and replied, “This is K6ATX/7 at the mike; handle of Tommy . . . Sorry, but it’s hard to drive a car and keep Noisy in check at the same time.”

W7RDR laughed, “We know what you mean, Tommy. Welcome to the peninsula. Hope to see you at the Wreckage clamfest this afternoon. Noisy, the answer to your query is negative, no ocean.”

Tommy sized up the terrain they were passing, wondering if

W7RDR's signal might be bouncing off some high hill or object, thereby causing a false-direction reading from the loop. But he saw no high points of ground, and certainly no high buildings that could serve to deflect a radio signal. As his uncle had said, North Beach Peninsula was really a long, low sandy dike. Even the lighthouses at North Head and Cape Disappointment, the highest elevations in the area, were only two hundred feet above sea level.

"What's this Haunted Fort you're talking about, Noisy?"

"Back in Civil War times the gover'nment was afraid the British fleet might sail into the Columbia and into Willapa Bay and grab back the Oregon Territory," Noisy explained. "So they built Fort Stevens in Oregon, Fort Columbia and Fort Canby down at the mouth of the river, and up here on the point, Fort Leadbetter, to shell any ships that tried to sneak into the harbor. But the forts were never used and—"

W7TYB broke in from a location in Nahcotta to ask if the hidden transmitter was able to see Bay Center from his hideout. The answer was "Negative"—so short a signal that it was impossible to swing the loop antenna to peak up the volume in time.

"You were telling me about the Haunted Fort?" Tommy prompted his companion. At this point they were traveling along a particularly dreary stretch of beach. The sand dunes at their right hand were piled high with a century's accumulation of tangled driftwood, stacked so high in places that it obscured their view of the forest inland.

"It's just a nickname for Fort Leadbetter, up ahead here," Noisy resumed. "Superstitious folks think the ghosts of drowned sailors from the shipwrecks on the peninsula use the underground passages of Fort Leadbetter for a meeting place in the dark of the moon. Halloween stuff, kid stuff."

Tommy chuckled. "An underground fortress sounds like a logical place for spooks off ghost ships, but not a very likely place to locate a hidden transmitter. Your signals wouldn't get out too well, would they?"

Noisy grabbed Tommy's arm and pointed ahead, where the vista was beginning to get hazy from low-drifting ground fog.

"Pull over alongside of that big driftlog yonder, Tommy, and park. It's only a short walk over to the dunes where there's an observation post of Haunted Fort—what we call the Pillbox. It isn't underground, and I've always thought that if ever I got to be a hidden

transmitter that's where I'd go."

Tommy obediently carried out Noisy's parking instructions.

"Now I tell you what," Noisy said briskly, in the manner of a field general issuing orders to his troops. "You climb out of the car and walk due east, see? Soon as you get past that tangle of driftwood yonder, you'll see the concrete blockhouse we call the Pillbox, up on the high sand ridge overlookin' the ocean. I'll stay here and monitor. I got a hunch you'll find old W7RDR squattin' in that Haunted Fort!"

Tommy's eyes narrowed suspiciously. It suddenly occurred to him that Noisy was up to some devilment or other—probably wanted an excuse to take another joy ride in the sports car, something his insurance policy, if nothing else, would not permit.

"Why don't you come with me, Noisy?" he asked.

Noisy's big brown eyes were innocent as a baby's. "I have to monitor the freq. Besides, you've got a sweater and I ain't, and it's cold out. Besides, I'm not eligible to win the prize anyway, being a Novice, but you are."

Tommy reached down and removed the ignition key to prevent Noisy from using the car.

"Hey, I've got to keep the motor running to keep the generator going!" Noisy protested, his sudden alarm giving away the scheme he had been planning. "Your radio will run down your battery and—"

Tommy climbed out of the car and slammed the door shut.

"Don't worry about the battery," he said, "If I find W7RDR in the Haunted Fort, he'll let you know over the air. If I don't find anybody, I'll be right back."

Tommy set off into the gathering fog, headed inland. He had gone only fifty steps when he hurried back to the car to extract a solemn promise from Noisy that he would not install a jumper wire across the ignition switch to get the motor started. Such a maneuver was certainly within range of the boy's capabilities, Tommy knew.

Armed with that promise—and hoping that Noisy's integrity would make him honor such a vow—Tommy once more headed across the dunes and soon found himself scrambling over an almost impenetrable barrier of driftwood. It was a ten-minute chore getting to the other side of the obstacle.

A hundred yards east, at the crown of the sand ridge and standing out starkly against a dark background of forest, was an octagonal-shaped concrete blockhouse which Tommy knew must be the "Pillbox"

observation post of Fort Leadbetter, most of which was concealed under bomb-proof roofs underground.

The Pillbox had a flat roof which was now overgrown with ferns and salal bushes, rooted in blow-sand which the wind had deposited there. Strain his eyes as he might, however, Tommy could see no sign of a hidden transmitter's antenna; but W7RDR, if he was concealed behind those concrete walls, could easily have hidden his antenna back in the brush.

It was a short, steep climb up the western face of the sand ridge to reach the base of the Pillbox wall.

Around on the south wall of the structure Tommy found what he was looking for, the entrance to the observation post. It was a rusty iron door, hanging ajar, set in the three-foot-thick wall. On the lintel was a deeply incised inscription: U.S. COAST ARTILLERY, 1864.

Stepping into the thick doorway, Tommy shouted through cupped hands, "CQ Haunted Fort?"—CQ being the general inquiry call which amateur radio operators use when they want to make a contact with any other station in range.

His own CQ came back to him in mocking echo. The Pillbox was obviously empty; Noisy's guess was wrong.

Tommy peered inside the Haunted Fort blockhouse. Sunlight streaming through the observation slot on the west wall revealed the rusty iron floor, empty save for leaves and trash, tin cans and old newspapers left by litterbugs who had probably picnicked in the building. Not even a field mouse could have concealed himself in this eight-sided cubicle.

A path led into the thick brambles behind the blockhouse, obviously to the other buildings of Fort Leadbetter, but exploring them would have to wait for another day. Tommy had an uneasy feeling that he had made a mistake in leaving Noisy alone with his car, down on the beach.

Skidding down the sandy slope to the beach level, Tommy began sprinting back toward the ocean as fast as he could travel in the thick grass and ankle-deep sand. He was midway to the inland side of the driftwood mountain range when he caught sight of Noisy Noyce hopping through the logs, coming in his direction.

Every few seconds, the boy would stop to peer at something in his hand. Then he would continue on his way through the driftwood tangle, until he reached the meander line grass.

It was a glint of sunlight on copper and chromium that told Tommy the worst. Somehow, Noisy had pried open the locked glove compartment, and was now playing with Uncle JC's super-secret miniature radio direction finder.

With a shout of anger Tommy raced through the deep grass thickets where the obstreperous Xtra Nervous Novice had vanished. Moments later, seeing a commotion in the grass, he pounced on the boy as a dog would pounce on a gopher.

Noisy was straddling a chunk of driftwood, carefully rotating the tiny direction-finding loop on the Super-Duper, while he studied the needle on the signal strength dial.

"Noisy—I ought to whale you good!" Tommy screamed in the boy's ear. "I ought to make you walk the fourteen miles back to Ocean Park! Breaking into a locked glove compartment."

Tommy wrested the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop from Noisy's fingers, noting with relief that it was undamaged. The kid had switched on the batteries that powered the transistors inside, however, which made the meter needle function.

Completely unperturbed, Noisy said, "Why didn't you tell me you had a portable direction finder, Tommy? I had barely turned on the current when an RF signal pinned the needle of that S meter. It sure pinpointed old W7RDR for me!"

Tommy's jaw dropped. He was staring at the quivering needle on the meter dial like someone who was seeing a ghost. It took a radio signal to make that needle move—and the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop could not register a radio signal outside the 60,000 to 60,100 megahertz range. That was a million light years higher in frequency than 29.5 megahertz, the ham radio transmitter-hunt range.

"What are you saying, Noisy?" Tommy's voice barely carried above the roar of the ocean and the howl of the breeze through the roundabout driftwood. "Pinpointed what hidden transmitter?"

"Sure!" Noisy yelled back. "I walked in a half circle to get here, and the loop always kept pointing straight into the driftwood yonder, right toward that upside-down cedar trunk you see stickin' up at an angle yonder. Lyle Stark's hid down in them driftlogs yonder!"

A numb, frightening sensation swept Tommy Rockford as he operated the Super-Duper for the first time. A spirit level enabled him to put the direction-finding loop in a perfectly vertical plane. When he pointed the loop north, or east, or south, he got no jiggle at all

on the signal-strength meter. But when the loop was aimed at the upended cedar trunk Noisy had pointed out, the needle went completely off scale to strike the pin.

“There’s a radio station in those driftlogs.” The thought blazed through Tommy’s brain like a naked flame. “But it can’t be a ham station, it can’t be . . . ”

His fingers trembled as he slid back the little panel that protected the miniature frequency meter dial of the instrument. He was almost afraid to look at what point on the 60,000 to 60,100 megahertz range this sinister signal was coming.

The tiny red needle pointed straight to the tiny red dot on the dial which, Uncle JC had said, indicated precisely 60,080.

And 60,080 megahertz was the frequency of Blackjack Gorin’s pirate radio network!

CHAPTER EIGHT

Camouflaged Antenna

Tommy's first impulse was to rush back to the car, fire up his transmitter on seventy-five meters, and give Uncle JC a call on 3820 kHz. But a glance at his watch killed the idea. It was now 9:30, and his uncle monitored only the first five minutes of the hour. For the next thirty minutes, then, JC would be out of reach of ham radio—and, unless he happened to be in his station wagon, wouldn't be listening for a call at ten o'clock, either.

"Listen, Noisy!" Tommy exclaimed, removing a key from his key ring and handing it to KA7XNN. "This unlocks the trunk of my car. You'll find a box of junk in there, radio stuff. Bring me back a pair of earphones you'll find there, will you?"

As soon as Noisy had vanished beyond the driftwood barrier, Tommy rechecked the compass bearing where the mysterious signals were loudest. Almost exactly 270° due west on the compass dial.

Left alone so he could think straight, Tommy began to doubt his own interpretation of what the Super-Duper gimmick was trying to tell him. Would a big-shot criminal like Blackjack Gorin, running his seagoing pirate ring by microwave radio, set up his station under a pile of weather-beaten driftlogs on a lonely beach when he had thousands of square miles of forest waiting to protest his secret? The whole thing was absurd.

"It'll turn out to be a short circuit in the Snooper-Loop somewhere," K6ATX told himself, talking out loud to steady himself. But the explanation didn't hold water. Come to think of it, looking around him, this was a pretty desolate spot. He doubted if a dozen people in a year ever fought their way through the driftwood as he

had done this morning.

Tommy glanced down at the face of the signal-strength meter again. The needle was straining against the pin, past the forty-decibels-over-S9 mark—meaning a signal too strong to calibrate.

Then, even as Tommy was staring at the evidence of a strong radio signal in the ether being picked up by the tiny loop antenna, the needle dropped back to zero. The station had gone off the air just then.

Another thought came on the heels of the first one: If a radio signal was coming from the driftwood pile, maybe another station would answer, on the same frequency!

With feverish haste Tommy began rotating the direction-finder loop of the Super-Duper. At due north, 0 on the compass dial, and at forty-five degrees, which was northeast, there was absolutely no motion on the sensitive needle.

Then, as the loop passed the eighty-eight degree mark on the dial, or almost due east of the spot where Tommy was standing, he saw the needle suddenly swing up to a reading of S3 on the scale.

The Super-Duper had detected a weaker signal, coming from the east. And in that direction lay the Haunted Fort—and beyond it, Willapa Bay!

At that moment Tommy was startled by a wind-muffled shout behind him. He whirled around in time to see the agile Noisy, hopping like a monkey from log to log, coming over the driftwood barrier.

Looped around Noisy's left wrist was a pair of 2000-ohm headphones. A moment later he was handing them to Tommy, who thrust the plug into the jack marked PHONES on the Super-Duper box and adjusted the headset on his ears.

The rubber pads shielded his ears from the moan of wind and waves. The instant he turned the direction-finder loop to eighty-eight degrees on the dial, he heard a modulated audio signal,

...2910KDB1490KIST1340KTMS1250DNR3911CLE ...

What had Uncle JC told him? That Blackjack Gorin's gang employed a code which government cryptographers had not as yet been able to decipher?

And then, behind the raspy nasal voice chanting its cryptic gibberish over the microwave frequency of 60,080 megahertz, Tommy heard a background noise that brought every nerve in his being tinglingly alert.

He recognized that sound as the click a loudspeaker would make

off-mike when a switch is thrown. And then, behind the recited figures and numbers of the operator at the microphone, came a hollow, barrel-like booming voice from that background loudspeaker:

Skookum call Waygart, over.

Instantly the mystery voice paused, then said, "Stand by *Vamoose*." The signal cut off; the needle on the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop dropped from S3 to zero.

With no sound in the earphones, Tommy now became aware of Noisy yelling in his ear, "Hear 'em, Tommy? Hear old RDR?"

Tommy nodded, not wanting to be bothered about explaining something he couldn't understand himself to a blabbermouth like Noisy Noyce.

"They're not transmitting now," he added some true information for the boy's benefit.

"Well, what are we waitin' for?" Noisy demanded, as Tommy removed the phones from his ears and hung the headband around his neck. "Let's crawl into that log jam and fish old Lyle Stark out of there with his portable rig, huh? I know darn well we'll win that prize."

Before Tommy could do anything to stop him, Noisy headed off through the breast-high grass of the meander line, making toward the upended cedar tree that marked the approximate source of the signals.

Momentarily, he lost sight of Noisy in the thicket. One thing he was certain of—he had intercepted a microwave radio contact between two stations identifying themselves by the code names of *Skookum* and *Vamoose*, both being Indian words, he believed.

Suddenly it came to him: Maybe by some freak of atmospherics he had been listening to the harmonic echo of a conversation between two ships at sea named *Skookum* and *Vamoose*. In that case, the signal had been coming at him *through* the driftwood barrier from some maritime mobile out at sea instead of originating *inside* the driftwood.

The explanation made so much sense that Tommy burst out laughing from sheer relief.

A moment later he broke through the hedge of salt grass to hear Noisy Noyce shouting his name above the whine of the wind and the pounding roar of the nearby surf.

For a moment Tommy couldn't locate the boy. Then, looking up, he saw him. Noisy had shinnied along the upended cedar tree's barkless trunk, weathered white as a new-minted silver coin, which ended in a bushy mass of tangled roots some fifteen feet overhead,

stark against the sky.

"Come down from there, Noisy," Tommy shouted, "before you slip and break your neck!"

Whatever Noisy said was lost in the wind. He was shaking his head adamantly, pointing up the slanting cedar tree bole toward the root system that stood out like scribbled ink lines against the ground fog.

Noisy began prying with his Boy Scout knife at something that appeared to be imbedded in a long, inch-wide crack in the cedar trunk. A moment later he pulled out a black hose or rope a half inch or so in diameter.

"It's coax cable, Tommy!" Noisy screamed. "Lyle Stark's got his antenna hid up this tree! I can see it hid in them roots!"

Thrusting the Super-Duper under his sweater to protect it, Tommy Rockford leaped forward to the spot where the slanting cedar bole, a good two feet in diameter, jutted up from the solid sand at the edge of the driftwood mountain.

The slim black snakelike object Noisy had found hidden deep in a crack of the dead cedar was not coaxial cable, as Noisy had said it was, but an even more mysterious electronic item—rubber-covered aluminum tubing engineers called "waveguide," for conducting microwaves where ordinary coax cable would not work.

Tommy glanced back up to where Noisy sat straddling the cedar bole, a dozen feet overhead. The boy was sawing at the waveguide with his Scout knife, obviously intending to sever it and put Lyle Stark's hidden transmitter off the air as a joke.

"Don't cut it!" Tommy shouted, so violently that Noisy dropped his knife with a clatter in the driftwood tangle below. "Come down from there, you little fool!"

Noisy, chastened by Tommy's anger, slid down the tree like a child on a bannister rail. Landing on the sand beside Tommy, he reached down to give the waveguide a jerk where it vanished underground.

"RDR must have it anchored to a ground rod," he commented. "Anyway, Tommy, that's a cute little antenna he's got hid up in those roots. Looks like a toy TV antenna inside a bird cage. Never saw the like of it in the handbooks or radio catalogues—must be something Lyle invented himself."

Cold perspiration oozed from the pores of Tommy's cheeks. An

antenna like a bird cage, fed by microwave guide—it all tied in with the 60,080-megahertz signals the Super-Duper had picked up. Every instinct in him warned him to get away from here.

But something stronger than fear—the knowledge that he had a duty to Uncle JC to perform before taking flight—told him he had to investigate those tree roots. Accordingly, Tommy got astride the slanting cedar trunk and started hitching himself up the bole as Noisy had done.

He was two-thirds of the way up to the bushy root system when he caught sight of the bird-cage antenna, or whatever it was that the black waveguide was connected to.

Hidden inside the tangled roots, the thing was hard to see, even when he crawled his way to within an arm's length of it. Even with it near enough to touch, Tommy couldn't say for sure what it was, certainly not what it was doing here in the roots of a dead cedar.

It looked like a bird cage of golden wire, globe-shaped, the size of a volley ball; and inside this spherical cage, like a canary on a perch, was a gimmick Noisy had described perfectly—a miniature television antenna of the Yagi type, only three or four inches long, such as a toymaker would solder to the roof of a dollhouse.

Whatever it was, it had been carefully installed among the roots of this tree—and the waveguide that fed power to it vanished into the sand like a ground wire.

In a sudden panic, Tommy Rockford slid down the tree to where Noisy was pawing around on all fours, hunting for his pocketknife.

"Lyle's a cagey one. That cable could run a hundred yards under the sand to his transmitter," Noisy remarked as Tommy's feet hit the ground. "He bought a lot of surplus coax down in Portland last winter, so he's got gobs of it handy."

An instant later Noisy found himself being hauled bodily to his feet by Tommy's powerful hand clamped to his right elbow.

"We're getting back to the car—we're getting out of here fast!" Tommy yelled. "Stop struggling and come on!"

"Hey—my knife!" Noisy bawled. "You made me drop it in those logs. Trudy gave me that knife last Christmas."

They were scrambling over the driftwood now, Tommy half dragging the protesting Noisy behind him.

"To heck with the knife. I'll buy you a dozen knives the first time we get to a store."

Mollified by this promise, Noisy made no more objections. They got back to the car in time to hear the hidden transmitter's voice once more:

"... so that winds up another fine business emergency preparedness drill, gang. To recapitulate, on a time-and-mileage basis Jay Stone, W7UFL, was the first to find us hidden in the loft of Glen Heckes' barn in Oysterville, using a lightning rod for a vertical antenna. Gene Taft, RDU, of Ocean Park, was second. We'll see you all at the Beachcomber's for fritters and chowder."

Tommy got the car backed around onto the hard sand and was truly relieved when they were bowling down the beach at fifty miles an hour, southbound. The tide was more than halfway in, narrowing the available roadway to a mere single lane track at some points.

"Noisy," K6ATX said when he got his breath back, "did you ever hear the words *skookum* and *vamoose*?"

"Sure," the boy replied. "Skookum is Chinook Indian talk for 'good.' According to the TV Westerns, doesn't 'vamoose' mean 'let's go' in Spanish? Or do you mean the boat?"

Tommy almost collided with a driftlog jutting out of the sand, he jerked the wheel so abruptly at Noisy's last word.

"Boat? You know a boat named the *Skookum* or the *Vamoose*?"

Noisy bent a puzzled stare at Tommy, as if wondering if his new friend K6ATX was a bit on the goofy side.

"Well, Waygart Brothers—that's the cannery outfit—have a tugboat they used for towing oyster bateaux around Willapa Bay. It's named the *Skookum*. I never heard of a *Vamoose* boat, though."

Tommy was thinking that over when Noisy added, "The *Skookum* is kept moored over at Stackpole Harbor, straight across the peninsula from Haunted Fort. Not much of a harbor; just a mud flat with a little dock for rowboats."

They turned inland at the Oysterville approach, joining a procession of tourists' cars being chased off the beach by the incoming tide. The waves would have trapped them before they could have covered the extra four miles to the Ocean Park approach.

Suddenly Noisy blurted out, "Hey, I just thought of something, ATX. If Lyle's hidden transmitter was in Heckes' barn over at Oysterville, usin' a lightnin' rod for an antenna, then what was that bird cage we found in the driftwood back yonder?"

Tommy thought grimly, "That's the big money question, kid."

Aloud, he said, "Can we reach Stackpole harbor by car?"

"Sure. It's a ruddy sand road from Oysterville up through Sherwood Forest, but okay this time of year. But we're going to take in Beachie's clambake at The Wreckage, ain't we?"

Tommy nodded. "That doesn't start for another hour. I'd like to take a side trip to Stackpole Harbor and have a look at this tugboat *Skookum*."

What, he asked himself, if it turned out to be Blackjack Gorin's floating radio station—which the FCC and the FBI believed to be somewhere in the depths of the forest east of Willapa Bay?

CHAPTER NINE

Aboard the Skookum

A moss-mottled signpost at the edge of the bayshore town of Oysterville pointed a sagging finger northward up an obscure side road, the faded letters reading STACKPOLE HARBOR 6.4 MI.

Taking that road, Tommy followed a ribbon of blacktop as far as a farmer's entry lane a mile north. From there on, the Stackpole Harbor road was a pair of sandy ruts leading through a virtual cavern under the greenery of Sherwood Forest's ancient cottonwoods, alders, spruce and jackpine growth.

At three miles on the speedometer they had to open an unlocked gate posted PRIVATE ROAD—KEEP OUT, which Noisy said was to keep out duck hunters mostly.

Finally the dank tunnel through the timber ended at the edge of a cove floored with black mud that smelled of rotten fish and vegetation. Noisy was saying disgustedly, not even looking up from a comic book he had produced from a pocket of his jeans, "I told you Stackpole Harbor wasn't worth visitin'."

Keeping secret his reasons for wanting to see this place where the oyster cannery anchored its fleet of scows, Tommy climbed out and walked down to the edge of the cove. A hundred yards offshore, Tommy saw a long line of squat-decked black barges anchored end-to-end, like a jetty sheltering Stackpole Harbor. These were the bateaux where oyster workers, in season, harvested the Japanese bivalves from the leased beds along the bay shores, loading them into baskets for towing to the hoppers of the cannery at Nahcotta.

On the starboard side of that row of barges Tommy saw the ugly

outlines of the towboat which, like a mother hen marshaling her row of chicks, towed the scows from oyster beds to cannery.

Hustling back to the car, Tommy fished his binoculars out of the glove compartment and focused them on the towboat out in the bay. The scows, he saw with the help of the glasses, all carried the name WAYGART BROS., NAHCOTTA, WN. on their hulls. But it was the name on the pilothouse of the deep-sea tugboat that Tommy wanted to learn

There it was, shining in the midday sunlight, gilt letters routed deep into a hardwood plank: SKOOKUM OF NAHCOTTA.

Automatically, Tommy ranged the binoculars over to the single mast jutting up from the tugboat's smokestack. A copper wire was wound spirally around that mast—a radio antenna, cut to the frequencies of the ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore channels, as carried by all marine craft.

Did that cannery tug, anchored here at Stackpole Harbor during the idle season, hold the secret of Blackjack Gorin's pirate gang? Somebody, not an hour ago, had been transmitting seemingly meaningless letters and numerals at 60,080 megahertz when a loudspeaker had interrupted him with the cryptic words "*Skookum* call Waygart, over."

The cannery could have been calling its tugboat caretaker on the shore-to-ship channel and the microwave transmitter had rebroadcast the routine call. Could that be the little slip that might prove the destruction of Gorin's pirate syndicate?

For long minutes, Tommy studied the wheelhouse and what he could see of the deck of the *Skookum*. Nothing moved aboard the tug. No smoke wisped from her stack. No flag flapped from her jackstaff. More than likely her keel was resting on mud bottom at this stage of the tide.

Lowering the glasses, Tommy looked around him. Near at hand was a board-and-bat shed with a rusty tin roof. He went over to it and peeked through a knothole to discover that the shed sheltered a yellow motorcycle with Washington plates.

Three rowboats with shipped oars were drawn up above high-water mark on the grassy edge of Stackpole Harbor. They belonged to Waygart Brothers, probably, and were used by the men who worked aboard the *Skookum*.

Back at the car, Tommy found Noisy listening to a QSO between

a ham in Seattle and a K2 in New York State, on twenty meters.

"Band's wide open," Noisy said in a thrilled voice. "Gee, Tommy, I wish you'd let me operate your rig, just once."

K6ATX put his binoculars back in the glove compartment.

"Nope—not until you get a General Class ticket, sonny boy." Once again Tommy removed the ignition key from the car to forestall Noisy's getting any more joy-riding ideas. "Noisy, I'm going to row out to look over those barges and the tugboat. I've always been fascinated by boats."

The younger boy nodded. "Me, too. Don't let Curly Winn catch you snooping, though "

"Who's he?"

"Waygart's bookkeeper. Lives aboard the *Skookum* summers as caretaker in return for his rent."

"Is that his Honda I saw in the shed?"

"Yeah. But mostly he travels in a speedboat, down to the Nahcotta dock. He keeps his car down at the cannery. Only uses the bike when the bay's too choppy for comfort."

Tommy swallowed hard. "Does this Mr. Winn—does he have short-cut gray hair and steel-rimmed glasses, and a scar like a question mark on his—"

"Nahh," Noisy cut in, eager to get back to his comic book. "He's redheaded, curly-haired. That's where he got his nickname of Curly."

Just to make sure KA7XNN didn't put his call on the air during his absence, Tommy unplugged the crystal mike with its push-to-talk circuitry and thrust it in his pocket. Noisy pretended not to notice.

By the time Tommy had returned to the three rowboats, the tidewater had formed a film almost to the grassy bank. It was a simple matter to skid one of the dories out into the glue-slick mud and, using a single oar as a pushing pole, maneuver the shallow-drafted flat-bottom craft out to floating depth.

Rowing with slow, powerful sweeps, Tommy sent the blunt-ended skiff out toward the row of anchored barges. Rounding the stern of the endmost scow to the south, he began sculling his rowboat toward the bow of the *Skookum*.

Minutes later Tommy was alongside the tugboat. He saw no sign of a launch, which led him to believe that Mr. Winn, the caretaker, was probably absent. Who, then, had been operating the mysterious microwave transmitter? Of course, any radio-equipped boat on the

bay could have picked up Waygart's call to the *Skookum*, Tommy realized. But if so, why did the mystery operator tell "Vamoose" to stand by, the instant the background speaker gave out with *Skookum's* call?

Anticlimax wilted Tommy's enthusiasm for this adventure when he realized that the microwave operator might have gone off the air for a moment for the purpose of shutting off the bothersome ship-to-shore speaker. If so, this visit to Stackpole Harbor had been for nothing.

Now that he was here, though, he might as well have a look aboard the *Skookum*. No harm in that. This was trespassing, yes, but if Mr. Winn caught him snooping around, he could play it straight: He was just an over-curious teenager from California who loved to fool around boats. No need to even mention illegal microwave radio equipment, no need at all.

He tied his rowboat to a rubber-tire bumper hanging from the hull amidships and clambered lithely over the gunwale. He gave the spiral-wrapped marine radio antenna a casual glance; he mustn't appear to be too interested in electronic gear. The *Skookum* was well equipped in that department, though. Atop the wheelhouse he recognized the doughnut-shaped antenna of the direction finder, and the dish on the mast which spoke of radar gear aboard for foggy nights.

He made his way along the narrow starboard deck to the nearest cabin porthole and, cupping his palms over his eyes, looked into the crew's quarters. Nobody home; bunks showed mattresses only, no blankets.

Up forward he found an unlocked, half-open door, the entry to the radio room directly under the pilothouse on the upper deck.

"Ahoy, *Skookum*! Anybody aboard?"

His only answer was a startled cry from a gull that had landed on the capstan up forward.

Tommy stepped over the steel coaming of the doorway and into the radio room. His heart was pounding, but that was from the exertion of rowing out here, not nervousness, he tried to tell himself.

He moved closer to examine the marine radiotelephone, idly resting a palm on the top of the cabinet as he bent closer to study a vernier attachment on a tuning dial.

An instant later he jerked his hand back as if he had touched a snake. The cabinet was hot, indicating that the set had only recently

been turned off!

Had he found the receiver on, he would have thought nothing of it; boat operators habitually monitored the Coast Guard distress frequencies, known as Channel Two.

Tommy flicked his attention over to the band switch of this five-channel receiver, to see if it had been set to 2182 kilohertz, the Coast Guard distress channel. But it was set to Channel One, which was the ship-to-shore frequency the *Skookum* would have used to contact the Waygart cannery office!

In that instant terror started building up in Tommy. Not because he had proof that someone had switched off this radiotelephone within the past few minutes, nor because his ears had heard anything unusual. There was only the lap-lap-lap of wavelets against the *Skookum*'s anchor chains, the cries of seafowl roosting on the flat-decked oyster bateaux alongside.

Without any real reason, he was afraid.

An instant later his subconscious warned him again. This time he identified the cause of his alarm. The deck under his feet had canted ever so slightly to starboard—a barely perceptible shift from the rhythm that was the normal lift and drop of the tugboat in the groundswells off the open bay. Because his keyed-up nerves were supersensitive to any minute shift of equilibrium on the boat, his brain had telegraphed to him a tiny change of balance. A weight of some sort had moved from one place to another on this boat...

"Looking for anything special, Buster?"

The voice was low-pitched, with a nasal quality that struck a chord in Tommy's memory. It came from behind him, with all the startling effect of a thunder bolt.

That voice was the raspy one he had picked up in the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop this morning, transmitting on 60,080 megahertz! Once heard, it could never be mistaken or forgotten.

Tommy forced himself to break the chains of paralysis that welded his rubber soles to the steel deck. He turned, to see a man standing in a companionway that led up from the engine room below.

He saw a bullet head shaggy with curly hair as red as a barn door and gooseberry-colored eyes slitted and malevolent behind heavy horn-rimmed spectacles. The predatory mouth was accented by a red mustache to match the curly hair, and the sideburns growing low and unbarbered along either temple almost but not quite concealed the

tiny fishhook-shaped scar on the left side, under a pockmark, which looked exactly like an inverted question mark.

“You’re—Curly Winn, the caretaker, sir?” Tommy heard himself ask in a quavering voice.

The man nodded. But Tommy Rockford knew that “Curly Winn” was Blackjack Gorin!

CHAPTER TEN

Blackjack Gorin

Somewhere far back in his brain Tommy wondered if his Uncle JC would ever solve the mystery of his nephew's disappearance. Would he wind up on the bottom of the bay?

The nasal, sandpapery voice was grating at his eardrums again. "You deaf and dumb or something? What are you doin' aboard this tug?"

Blackjack Gorin climbed on up into the radio room now. He was chunky-built, a head shorter than Tommy's six feet, dressed in a striped T-shirt and dungarees. His arms were shaggy with fine black hairs that didn't match the red dye-job on his scalp and mustache.

"I—I'm just a—teenaged tourist f-from California, Mr. Winn," Tommy parroted his rehearsed lines if he were caught snooping. "I just like to, uh, prowl around boats."

Gorin's lips whitened with pressure. "Where you from, tourist?"

"Santa B-Bonita, sir. That's in California, a hundred miles up the coast from LA. I'm—vacationing up—here."

Gorin's cat-green eyes looked more menacing than ever.

"What's your name, tourist?"

Tommy told him.

"Where-at you stayin', tourist?"

"In—Ocean Park, sir. I—I'll be leaving right away, sir. I wasn't—planning to harm anything, steal anything."

Gorin moved swiftly to the doorway, blocking the only exit, other than the engine-room ladder, from this cabin.

"I watched you row out from the harbor. How'd you get so far from Ocean Park—walk?"

Tommy licked his lips. Some of his confidence was back, now, for he knew if it came to the worst he could lick this hard-eyed criminal in a fist fight. Unless Gorin was packing a gun or a switchblade knife, which he probably was.

"I drove up in my car, sir."

"Opened my gate with the NO TRESPASS sign on it?"

"No, sir. I mean, yes sir, I'm afraid I did, sir."

A scowl carved its notch between Gorin's brows.

"Anybody with you, tourist?"

"No, sir." He saw no reason to put Noisy in jeopardy. Maybe he should have said he had a carload of teenagers in the car, waiting for him to row back to shore.

"What were you doing in the radio room, tourist?"

Tommy was hoping against hope Gorin wouldn't see the bulge in his hip pocket, made by the crystal mike. He didn't want to reveal that he was an amateur electronics expert.

"The door was open, sir, and—didn't you hear me holler before I came in?"

Gorin nodded his bullet head. "I heard you," he growled. "The point is, you thought nobody was on board, so you'd prowler around. When I came in you were jumpin' like a bee had stung you when you put your hand on that radio set. Why?"

Tommy's face went bone white. The answer to that could get him killed, but fast. In that strained moment, he heard a shrill shout from alongside the *Skookum*: "Tommy! Hey, K6ATX—where are you?"

It was the old blabbermouth himself, Noisy.

"What in the—" Snarling an oath, Blackjack Gorin spun to face the doorway, cords standing out on his neck. Then he turned back to spike Tommy with his green-eyed glare.

"I thought you said you was alone, Buster!"

Tommy gave a sickly grin. "I thought you meant—in the rowboat, Mr. Winn."

"Tommy! Yoo-hoo! Where you at, Tommy?"

It was Noisy's shrill, adolescent treble, and it was music to Tommy Rockford's ears. Bless Noisy and his insatiable curiosity!

Blackjack Gorin ducked out of the radio room and crossed the starboard deck in two strides. Tommy seized his chance and slipped out of the cabin, never so grateful in his life for the blue sky overhead and the sun's warmth on his face.

"Noisy, you little wall-eyed pest," Gorin shouted to the boy in the rowboat below, "what are you doin' swipin' Bob Whitten's skiff? He'll skin you alive."

Noisy, obviously taken aback by this outburst, blinked a time or two and then said meekly, "Gosh, Mr. Winn, I just wanted to ask Tommy if he thought we ought to go over and get that radio antenna out of the driftwood pile to take down to the Beachcomber for his museum."

Tommy's heart hit bottom. Of all things, Noisy Noyce had to go and blab to Blackjack Gorin.

Vaulting the low rail of the tugboat, Tommy landed on the flat bottom of his waiting rowboat with a crash that nearly capsized him and Noisy's skiff as well.

Gorin did not even seem to notice. His face had gone a pasty gray, his hard mouth slack and loose-lipped as, for a fleeting instant, pure panic gleamed in his gooseberry-colored eyes.

"Radio antenna for Beachcomber's museum—what in thunder are you blabbering about, kid?"

Noisy was his old grinning self again.

"Why, Tommy and me discovered a kind of a bird cage with a toy-sized TV antenna inside of it, Mr. Winn. We—"

"We're trespassing where we got no business," Tommy cut in frantically, untying the painter of his boat and grabbing the oars. "Let's get out of here!"

Blackjack Gorin—or Curly Winn, as the peninsula knew him—remained standing at the tugboat rail as if mesmerized.

Something in the man's eyes suddenly scared Noisy. He pushed his borrowed rowboat away from the *Skookum* and set out behind Tommy, who, in his haste, was down on his knees between the thwarts, paddling canoe fashion.

They rounded the north end of the row of oyster barges without hearing a gunshot ring out, or the whistle of a bullet past their ears—calamities which Tommy Rockford had fully expected would happen.

All that mattered now was getting ashore alive. If they were that lucky, there would be time to think about the best way to report his sensational discovery to Uncle JC, up in Aberdeen. Why, if Noisy's blabbermouthing about the camouflaged antenna didn't scare Gorin away from Willapa Bay, they might wind up the whole detective case inside their first twenty-four hours at Ocean Park! That would be a

sensation, even for JC Ellison.

"What's eating you, Tommy?" Noisy yelled, when they were halfway across the placid waters of Stackpole Harbor. "Curly Winn wouldn't throw us in jail just for visiting his old tub. He's just a two-bit bookkeeper, my Dad says; nobody important."

"You talk too much!" Tommy grated through his teeth, almost falling overboard when his skiff grounded its keel on a pile of broken bottles and rusty tin cans which the incoming tide had concealed.

"Gosh," said Noisy Noyce, deftly maneuvering his own rowboat to avoid a collision, showing a skill that came from having grown up on the shores of Willapa Bay. "What did I say?"

"Shut up! Just shut up, will you?"

The anger in Tommy's voice chastened Noisy, for he remained silent and subdued, if obviously puzzled by this treatment, during the time it took them to wade ashore, dragging their boats.

Wiping the odorous black mud off his shoes when they got to the grassy shore, Tommy stared back at the *Skookum* without seeing any trace of Blackjack Gorin. In his mind's eye, Tommy conjured up a picture of the escaped convict squatting in the tugboat's cabin barking orders into a microphone for his henchmen to intercept a pair of inquisitive kids who needed "rubbing out."

Noisy, undecided whether to start cracking jokes or maintain a contrite silence, followed Tommy back to the car. He had begun to look up to K6ATX, seeing in the radio ham from California a model to pattern himself after; so it was a trifle disillusioning to see what a scare a little bookkeeper had thrown into his new-found hero, out there on the *Skookum*. Everybody knew Curly Winn was harmless.

Uppermost in Tommy Rockford's mind at this moment was the urgent necessity for getting in touch with his Uncle JC.

The quickest way to do that was by ham radio. He wouldn't dare go into details over the air, of course, for fear of being monitored by the wrong ears, in which case Blackjack Gorin would be forewarned to take flight.

Tommy's watch showed eighteen minutes before twelve o'clock when he and Noisy reached the car. With any luck at all, JC Ellison would be tuned in on 3820 kilohertz at high noon, up in Aberdeen.

"Tommy," Noisy asked timidly as they got the car started back down the sandy road toward Oysterville, "are you still mad at me?"

Tommy started. He had momentarily forgotten Noisy even

existed.

"Mad at you? Of course not." It had just occurred to Tommy that if Noisy hadn't shown up at the *Skookum* when he did, he might not even be alive right now.

Reaching down to switch on his ham rig, Tommy went on, "I was sure glad to see you, Noisy. I was in a tight spot, getting caught red-handed snooping around in the radio shack by—what did you say his name was?"

"Curly Winn Heck, he wouldn't hurt nobody."

"If you only knew who Curly Winn really is," Tommy thought to himself, and a shiver coasted down his back like ice water. Out loud he said, "Tell me what you know about this Mr. Winn, Noisy. I think maybe I've seen him before someplace."

He was noticing, subconsciously, that the red pilot light on his transmitter hadn't come on when he flipped the switch, and made a mental note to replace it. It was a reminder not to leave the rig on and drain the battery dry.

"Don't know much to tell," Noisy muttered, engrossing himself in the comic book again. "He showed up two summers back and got a bookkeeping job with Waygart's."

"That jibes," Tommy thought, "with what Unk told me about Gorin's escaping from prison and going undercover."

"He runs around on that Honda you saw in the shed, and like I told you, summertimes when the tug and barges are tied up he lives on the *Skookum*. Doesn't seem to like people around him; keeps his nose buried in his bookkeepin' books."

An ideal setup for a criminal operating a big-scale pirate syndicate, Tommy mused silently.

He leaned down to twist a dial on his radio. "Wonder why the rig didn't come on?" he muttered, realizing they were two miles on the road now and no sound from the speaker yet.

"Maybe," Noisy Noyce said, covering his face with his comic book, "it's on account of I busted it while you were rowin' that skiff out to the *Skookum*. But I didn't mean to."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

At KA7XNN's Hamshack

The car had traveled another hundred yards and was rattling across the cattleguard at the Stackpole Harbor gate before Tommy reacted to Noisy's announcement.

"What? You *busted my rig*? What are you trying to tell me, you confounded little—little—*vandal*?"

Noisy cringed as far against the other side of the car as he could without falling out the window. He produced a plastic-handled screwdriver from a pocket and proceeded to poke it through a ventilating hole in the side of the transmitter cabinet.

"I was poking around," Noisy said contritely, "when I felt a wire give, and I got down and looked, and I think a solder joint broke loose."

Tommy gripped the steering wheel until his knuckle bones threatened to pop through the skin. He would have liked nothing better at this moment than to seize Noisy by the neck and choke him half to death.

Why, this meant it would be impossible to raise his uncle via seventy-five meter phone at noon! By one o'clock, the next monitoring period, he could have the broken joint resoldered—he always carried a repair kit for his equipment when he was away from home—but by that time Blackjack Gorin might have skipped the country for good.

He didn't know where his uncle was visiting in Aberdeen, or even the name of the FCC monitoring crew that he and JC were relieving, starting the next Monday. Every hour counted now.

"I'm sorry, Tommy," Noisy said miserably. "I'd fix it myself, only I don't have many tools. I got a part-time job deliverin' groceries

but it takes all of that money to keep Dad goin' when he's out of work."

"Noisy," Tommy asked suddenly as they left Oysterville behind them and got barreling on the Nahcotta highway, "what kind of a transmitter did you say you had?"

The boy's eyes lighted with eagerness, not only to talk about his ham radio hobby, but to divert Tommy from grimmer matters, such as broken solder joints.

"It's the eighty-meter CW rig in the *ARRL Handbook*. Runs ten watts to an off-center-fed skyhook. I've had 599 signal reports from Alaska an' Oklahoma an' California an'—"

"It doesn't have a modulator for voice transmission?"

Noisy chuckled. "I'm just a Novice, remember? We can't operate phone, and besides, those rigs cost more money than I'll ever scrape together."

"Noisy, I'm going to borrow your rig for a few minutes," he said, seeing the Nahcotta wharf and moorage basin coming into view a mile to the southward. "I've got a sked with my uncle up in Aberdeen for noon sharp. Okay with you?"

Noisy nodded eagerly. "Sure thing. I been wanting to show you my hamshack anyway. And Aberdeen's only thirty-five miles away, airline. Easy to reach, short skip, even at noontime,"

Minutes later Noisy was directing Tommy to a parking space on a wharf built out over the Nahcotta mud flats just south of the main county dock, which extended out into Willapa Bay to the deep-water channel. This wharf belonged to the Waygart Brothers Oyster Company, whose cannery stood on barnacled pilings over the water.

Tommy followed Noisy down a rickety flight of stairs under the cannery to where a tarpaper shanty had been built above high-tide level, under the floor of the wharf proper. It had originally been intended as a storeroom for oyster tongs, lobster pots and other odds and ends, but Noisy's stepfather had appropriated it as a rent-free home.

The litter of garbage, tin cans and empty bottles outside the shack was enough to turn Tommy's stomach, but he forced a carefree grin to his lips, sensing that Noisy was embarrassed to bring friends here.

Tommy followed the boy through the doorway into a single room, which reeked of rancid bacon grease, unwashed bedding and overflowing ashtrays. Tommy's raking glance took in the rust-scabbled

cookstove in one corner, double-decked bunks rumpled with old quilts, a packing-case table littered with soiled playing cards and poker chips—and one corner curtained off with an old army blanket as if to hide whatever lay behind it.

“The County Welfare folks tried to make me live in a foster home over at Lebam,” Noisy said, as if he felt he owed Tommy an explanation for living in such tawdry surroundings. “I kept runnin’ away so often they finally give up. County nurse thinks it’s because I’m loyal to my stepfather. But it ain’t that, Tommy; I’ll be honest with you. It’s my hamshack I wanted to come back to. Station KA7XNN is the one thing I got I’m proud of.”

As he spoke, Noisy slid back the greasy army blanket as an impresario might open the curtain on an opera set—and Tommy felt a lump rise in his throat.

“Station KA7XNN,” Noisy said proudly. “Not much to look at, maybe, but I’m almost halfway to my Worked All States certificate, and soon as I get my General and can go on twenty meters with more power I’ll go after my WAC diploma for Workin’ All Continents. I already belong to the League and the Rag-Chewer’s Club, o’ course.”

Tommy’s eyes were moist as he looked over Noisy’s beloved ham station. The tarpaper walls flanking the window above the radio bench were papered with QSL cards, the confirmations that radio hams exchange after a completed two-way contact.

This humble collection of Noisy’s was insignificant compared with Tommy’s QSL display down home, which carried geographical locations as numerous as the index of an atlas, verifying QSOs he had had all over the world. Noisy’s cards were mostly from Novices in the neighboring states of Oregon, California, Idaho and Montana. But each one of those postcards bearing a ham station’s call in big print, Tommy Rockford knew from experience, represented a thrilling experience—a personal conversation via a radio key, with signals that had vaulted mountains and deserts and trackless oceans.

“I’m glad to see you make your own equipment, Noisy,” Tommy commented, seating himself before the transmitter. “If more hams followed your example we’d be in less danger of the government’s taking away our frequencies and giving them to commercial and military communication.”

Tommy tuned from Noisy’s novice frequency to the prearranged 3820 kilohertz. He turned on the power supply, noting by his watch

that he had seven minutes to tune up and load the antenna—a random-length long wire tied to a piling of the Nahcotta dock a hundred feet away—before twelve o'clock sharp. He turned on the SW-7800 receiver sitting next to the transmitter, setting the dial to 3820.

Noisy remained silent, watching Tommy's expert fingers adjust dials and knobs as he adjusted the transmitter's grid drive and final tuning and loading. To Noisy it was like watching a skilled pianist manipulate the keyboard.

Tommy reached for the nearly antique J-38 telegraph key, Noisy's eyes noting every detail of the relaxed, expert ease with which he gripped the insulated knob and began a string of dots and dashes too fast for Noisy to follow:

W7OE W7OE W7OE DE K6ATX/7 K6ATX/7 K6ATX/7

Three times Tommy Rockford sent the calling sequence. Strictly speaking, he knew he should have signed "KA7XNN" for the station he was using, but he knew Uncle JC would be listening for his nephew's call sign.

Making sure Noisy's Heathkit SW-7800 receiver was tuned to exact "zero beat" with the transmitter, Tommy tapped out the symbol "K" meaning for his uncle, W7OE, to go ahead.

No answering signal came from the headphones Tommy clamped to his ears—only the hash and crackle of static and tube noise. There was no guarantee, of course, that JC Ellison would be listening on this frequency; he could very easily be away from the car, eating in a restaurant, or conferring with the FCC radio monitors, or anything else.

Beads of perspiration popped out on Tommy's forehead as he waited, the only outward indication of the strain he was under.

After a fruitless minute of listening and tuning for a possible signal off the frequency in case Noisy's receiver had drifted, Tommy switched the antenna back to transmit and repeated his W7OE DE K6ATX/7 sequence. When he gave the go-ahead K signal it was four minutes past twelve—only one minute left in the period JC habitually monitored when he was in his car.

This time the noise in the phones was blanked out by a strong signal and Tommy's lips moved in a slight prayer of thanksgiving as his uncle's familiar, resonant voice filled his ears:

"QRZ, QRZ the code signal calling W7OE. You've got chirps and key clicks and what are you doing in the phone portion of the

band with CW? This is W7OE mobile, Aberdeen.”

“QRZ” was the International Q-code signal for “who is calling me?” At least Tommy knew Noisy’s rig was getting a signal, even if a ragged one, into Aberdeen.

Forcing his hand to stop trembling, Tommy Rockford tapped out his desperate message:

W7OE, RETURN IMMEDIATELY, URGENT EMERGENCY, K6ATX/7.

He repeated the message three times and then switched to receive. He heard nothing. Had he failed to reach his uncle with his desperate, all-important news?

CHAPTER TWELVE

Map at the Wreckage

After what seemed an eternity of straining his ears for a signal—a time lapse measured by twenty seconds on a clock dial, the time it took his uncle to crush out a cigarette in the ashtray and pick up his microphone—W7OE's voice came:

"Roger, Tommy, copied that solid. Is this bad news in the mail from our families?"

Tommy flashed back: "NEGATIVE."

"Is it—er, a business emergency?"

Relief flowed through Tommy like a cool breeze, knowing he and his uncle were in cahoots now. "Business" could only mean the Neptunian Insurance business that had brought them to the Willapa Bay area. Blackjack Gorin business.

"AFFIRMATIVE!" He dared not give any details, knowing Noisy's little home-built transmitter might be broadcasting a signal over a thousand mile radius or beyond. "CAN YOU RETURN NOW?"

There was a pause at JC's end; then W7OE's voice came a trifle more sharply, a bit less relaxed: "K6ATX/7, will leave immediately, should make it to Alderedge in an hour unless I run into logging-truck traffic on Highway 101 this side of Raymond. W7OE over off and clear."

Tommy tapped out "K6ATX/7 VIA KA7XNN CL," meaning clear, and pulled the big switch to put Noisy's station off the air.

Removing the headphones from his ears, he said to the boy who had stood at his elbow throughout the transmission, "It's getting on to a quarter past twelve, Noisy. We'd better be getting over to the Beachcomber's hamfest before all the clam fritters are gone, huh?"

It was a good way to change the subject painlessly and distract Noisy's attention away from his W7OE contact. He doubted if the boy had been able to copy such fast CW, but he couldn't be sure.

It was but a few minutes' drive to cross the peninsula to the ocean side and turn south to the Beachcomber's log cabin. They found all available parking spots occupied in front of The Wreckage's driftwood fence.

Without exception, these cars sported ham antennas on cowl or bumper, including a variety of direction-finding loops similar to Tommy's. Most of them, Tommy believed, were local PARK members, but a sprinkling of out-of-state licenses proved a number of visiting radio amateurs were attending the clamfest.

Trudy Galt's call, K6ZNT, was emblazoned in decal letters across the window of a California car in the lineup, Tommy observed—and knew in advance the clamfest would be a success for him.

"Be sure and bring your miniature direction finder, Tommy!" Noisy said as they parked the car and climbed out. "The gang would sure enjoy seein' that little transistor job, I bet!"

Alarm shot through K6ATX. The Super-Duper Snooper-Loop was one gadget he had to keep under wraps at all costs.

"I want to explain something, Noisy," Tommy said desperately. "That gimmick doesn't belong to me, and I could get in bad trouble if anyone knew I let you see it, let alone use it. Uh—it hasn't been patented yet, understand? So don't breathe a word to a soul about it, huh?"

Noisy was flattered to be taken into Tommy's confidence.

"Okay, not a soul, I mean not a peep to anybody," he promised. "Let's go—I can smell the chowder from here!"

They entered the big front gate Tommy had noticed the night before with its rustic letters, formed of twisted driftwood and sand-scoured tree roots, spelling out the name THE WRECKAGE. The Beachcomber had laid out a miniature golf course on his broad lawn, and here and there loomed the grotesque shape of a mythical animal that the old man had fashioned out of driftwood picked up on the beach during more than half a century's lonely walks.

Noisy led the way straight to the massive front door, and without bothering to use the fisherman's float knocker, yanked the knotted rawhide latch string and waved Tommy inside.

Tommy had a confused picture of a spacious living room with

heavy log-beamed ceiling, a crackling fire in a huge rock hearth, a bewildering hodgepodge of museum objects everywhere—a room in which every available seating space seemed to be taken up with a happy-go-lucky crowd of men, women and teenagers, all chattering like magpies.

Noisy brought a sudden silence with his piercing treble: “Kilo Alfa Seven Xtra Nervous Novice checkin’ in—and folks, I want you to meet my friend from California, handle of Tommy, call of King Six Always Take X-lax. Tommy, I’m headin’ for the kitchen and leavin’ you to be initiated into the PARKers.”

Tommy found himself besieged by a happy-faced bunch of ham operators, their YLs, OMs, and XYLs. Some of the calls were familiar to him from over-the-air chats in the past, mostly members of traffic nets living in the larger cities of Portland, Tacoma and Walla Walla.

Others were local hams. W7RDR, this morning’s hidden transmitter operator, turned out to be boss of a smoked-oyster plant; W7UFL, the winner of the prize for the hunt, was a government fish and game warden, and so on.

The “initiation rites” demanded for honorary membership in the PARK proved to be a stunt which, to succeed, had to make the gang laugh.

“Okay, here goes,” grinned Tommy Rockford, trying to get his mind off more serious matters, such as solving the riddle of the mysterious *Vamoose* station. Would it prove to be out on the high seas, perhaps, picking up the loot of one of Gorin’s seagoing safecrackers?

“What do the following have in common”—Tommy posed his pet riddle to the waiting hams—“a radio ham, a Chinaman who’s misplaced his wig, and a bill collector?”

There was a thoughtful silence on the part of the assembled crowd while they tried to puzzle out answers to K6ATX’s riddle. The lull was broken by the arrival of Trudy Galt from the kitchen. She worked her way to Tommy’s side and slid an arm through his, waiting for the gang to give up, which they finally did.

“Okay, here are the answers,” Tommy said. “A radio ham says CQ, the Chinaman looking for his lost wig says ‘See Queue?’ while the bill collector will *seek you!*”

The resulting bedlam of laughter and burst of applause told Tommy Rockford that K6ATX would from this moment forward be

entered on the rolls of the Peninsula Amateur Radio Klub as a visiting member in good standing.

With Trudy at hand to help him forget about such things as Black-jack Gorin and the still unsolved mystery of what, who or where *Vamoose* was, Tommy began to get into the spirit of the hamfest.

Trudy Galt took him in tow, explaining that the Beachcomber wasn't quite ready to feed the mob, and while they waited she took him on a conducted tour of the Wreckage museum.

The Beachcomber's decades of combing the peninsula shoreline, especially after storms had loaded the beach with flotsam and jetsam, had resulted in his turning The Wreckage, both upstairs and down, into a real showplace.

All the mementos of long-forgotten ghost ships wrecked on the peninsula became a meaningless jumble in Tommy's brain, however. There were canvas life-rings like candy mints, each with the name and home port of some luckless ship of long ago; portholes and running lights, ship's wheels, small anchors, a veritable library of ship's logbooks salvaged from wrecks; fishermen's floats carried by the Japanese current all the way across the Pacific; glass balls ranging in size from tennis balls to basket balls—the list seemed endless.

It came as a relief to find himself at last alone with Trudy in the roomy upstairs dormer, overlooking the front yard. The Beachcomber used this as his "chart room," lining the walls and ceiling with old maps and decorating the room to resemble the pilot house of an old-time vessel, complete with a six-foot helm, brass binnacle with compass, engine telegraph and a set of ships' flags, one for each letter of the alphabet.

"You're tired, Tommy," Trudy said, "so why don't you sit down and let me bring you the fritters and cider? We can eat up here and get acquainted—unless you want to plunge into that madhouse downstairs. They're all nice folks, but sometimes I get fed up with ham talk."

Tommy grinned. "Nothing I'd like better."

After Trudy had vanished in the direction of the downstairs kitchen Tommy opened one of the dormer windows so as to be sure he heard his uncle's station wagon when it pulled into the road out front, headed for Alderedge.

He was just getting settled in a captain's chair beside the big steering wheel, a chair which had belonged to the skipper of the steam-

ship *Iowa*, which went down in 1936 on the shoals of Peacock Spit with all hands drowned—according to a hand-lettered tag the Beachcomber had tacked to the arm of the chair—when footsteps clattered up the stairs and Noisy Noyce, a clam-fritter bun in either hand, entered the dormer.

“Want to show you somethin’ extra special, Tommy,” KA7XNN said in a conspiratorial whisper, setting his clam fritters on the binnacle housing. “The Beachcomber never shows this to the public. He doesn’t even know I know about it.”

Before Tommy could protest, Noisy got down on all fours and, reaching under the sofa, pulled out what appeared to be a six-foot-wide roll of ship’s sail, heavy-textured canvas, obviously of great age.

“It’s a map of all the ghost ships that were wrecked on the Peninsula or the mouth of the Columbia,” Noisy explained, “in which there was loss of life. It’s a sight to see.”

While he was jabbering, Noisy weighted down two corners of the strip of sailcloth and unrolled it, like a narrow rug, across the dormer room floor.

Tommy Rockford had to gasp out of sheer admiration for the artwork the Beachcomber had put on the canvas. It was a large-scale pictorial map of the North Beach Peninsula area, from Clatsop Spit, on the south bank of the Columbia’s mouth, to Cape Shoalwater, north of the Willapa Harbor entrance.

If he hadn’t know this was the artwork of the Beachcomber, Tommy would have guessed that this map was at least two hundred years old. Its border was decorated with macabre symbols, many of them nautical—skulls and crossbones, patch-eyed buccaneers, cutlasses dripping blood. There were puff-cheeked North Winds, anchors and belaying pins, smoking cannon, grappling hooks and hangropes hanging from yardarms.

But of greatest interest were the grim crosses, in blood-red oil paint, each standing like a gravestone marking the spot where a ship had gone down with loss of life. The towns were there—Ocean Park, Nahcotta, Oysterville and the others—no longer mere names to Tommy, though he had not yet been on this sandspit twenty-four hours. The map showed all the finger lakes and wild cranberry bogs and tangled forests that clogged the interior of the peninsula. He saw the Haunted Fort listed, and the anchorage at Stackpole Harbor, showing the high-tide water depths in fathoms. The whole thing

reminded Tommy of the pirate chart in *Treasure Island*, with the red Xs marking the site of buried treasure.

Each shipwreck symbol on the Beachcomber's chart of ghost ships was identified by a number which referred the reader to a list of names, tonnages, dates of loss and number of casualties of the unlucky ships of the past, together with lists of survivors.

"I don't know why the Beachcomber keeps this map secret," Noisy was saying. "I think because he's going to copyright it and sell postcard copies to the tourists, or something. Anyway, ain't it a beaut?"

Tommy got down on his knees to study the map more closely.

He was looking particularly at the spot near Leadbetter Point, immediately west of the Haunted Fort—designated on the chart as *Leadbetter Fort, founded 1864, abandoned 1919*—where one of Beachcomber's ghost ship symbols had been located. It bore the number 73—which in ham radio code had a happy connotation.

A tingle went through the hairs of Tommy's neck-nape as he realized that Ghost Ship Number 73 had been wrecked high and dry on the beach at what appeared to be exactly the same spot where they had found the strange bird-cage antenna amid the driftwood.

Shuddering, Tommy swung his eyes over to the corner of the map where the list of names and numbers had been set down in archaic Old English lettering.

Ghost Ship Number 73, he noted, had been an American lumber schooner of 981 tons. Loss of life, 24; survivors, 1.

But it was the name of the ship that hit Tommy between the eyes with the impact of a closed fist. Ghost Ship Number 73 bore the name *Vamoose*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Spark-Gap Legend

“**H**ow do you like my ghost ship chart, boys?” The voice came from the stairwell at their backs. It was hard to say which boy jumped the most, Tommy or Noisy. They had been caught red-handed looking at the Beachcomber’s secret map, and by the Beachcomber himself.

Jumping to their feet, the boys took one look at the old man’s twinkling blue eyes and knew they were not in trouble. The Beachcomber, looking more than ever like a Disney cartoon character in his tall white chef’s cap and barbeque apron, seemed actually pleased to have found the two boys so engrossed in looking over what had obviously taken him many months, and possibly years, to compile.

“I noticed your finger running down the list of ships, Tommy,” the old man said, hunkering down on his haunches before the spread-out chart. “You stopped at my favorite ghost ship of them all, Number 73, the old *Vamoose*. Any special reason?”

Tommy swallowed hard. He couldn’t say “because Noisy and I found a strange radio antenna marking the *Vamoose*’s grave” or that the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop had picked up a QSO on 60,080 megahertz in which the names *Skookum* and *Vamoose* were mentioned.

Noisy came to the rescue: “Because 73 is a ham radio number, like 88.” Eighty-eight in ham talk meant “love and kisses.”

The Beachcomber appeared satisfied with this explanation. Fishing pipe and tobacco pouch out from under his apron, the old gnome said reminiscently, “I must tell the radio club about the old *Vamoose* sometime. She happens to be the first ship ever wrecked in these waters that tried to call for help with wireless telegraphy. Up to that time,

when a ship was in distress all she could do was fire rockets, or fire a cannon, or pray. But the *Vamoose*—she had a spark-gap wireless aboard. Matter of fact, her wireless operator, Spark-Gap Gallagher, was the only seaman aboard who didn't drown, an' that was because he tied hisself to a stanchion in the wireless room, tapping out his CQD until the storm drove her aground, up on the Point."

Both Tommy and Noisy knew that "CQD" was the distress signal used in wireless telegraphy before the nations of the world got together and agreed on the symbol "SOS" to replace it. Three dots, three dashes, three dots—SOS now meant distress in every language on the globe.

"Tell us about Spark-Gap Gallagher, sir!" Noisy pleaded. He winked at Tommy. "The Beachcomber's the world's champion storyteller, Tommy, if you don't take him too serious."

The Beachcomber said, "This is no fairy tale, boys—the story about Spark-Gap Gallagher—that I can tell you for sure. One of the first marine radio operators in history, he was, but of course they didn't call it radio then. The *Vamoose* had always been a hoodoo ship in the lumber trade betwixt Puget Sound an' Frisco."

Trudy Galt eased into the dormer room, caught sight of the three figures crouched in front of the ghost ship chart spread out on the floor, and without a sound handed Tommy a mug of apple cider and a paper plate of clam fritters.

"It's a ghostly tale," the old man said, "of a storm at sea, and Spark-Gap Gallagher—called that because that was in the days of spark transmitters (you boys know more about that than I would)—he knew the *Vamoose* was founderin', but he had faith in that copper wire strung from the captain's cabin for'd to the top of the mainmast.

"The last entry in the logbook—it's in my collection downstairs—had the *Vamoose* on her beam-ends, with two masts already gone, at latitude 47° north, longitude 125° west. That would put her fifty-odd miles off the entrance to Shoalwater Bay. That was where the skipper ordered all hands to take to the boats, afore the *Vamoose* turned turtle.

"But young Spark-Gap Gallagher—he was barely twenty at the time—he stayed in the wireless room, tappin' away at the key, aiming to stay as long as his batteries lasted, hopin' some other ship might hear the CQD and the latitude and longitude readings. Turned out several ships an' shore stations did, but none dared go out in that storm

to investigate.

"So Spark-Gap Gallagher lashes himself to a stanchion alongside of his wireless rig. The last mast was gone, takin' his aerial wire with it. The wireless operator at Tillamook Rock, off the Oregon Coast, heard the last signal and alerted the Klipsan Beach lifesaving station, here on the peninsula, to hitch a team to a surf boat and start patrolin' the beach, that the *Vamoose* was headin' for shore, a derelict with nobody mannin' the helm an' not a scrap o' canvas on her spars.

"The *Vamoose* was stout-built, a steel hull, uncommon for those days in the lumber trade. The tide was extra full that long ago night when the storm drove her ashore, up at the Point—right under the guns of old Fort Leadbetter, it was. You see where I put her on the map. She was the seventy-third major wreck lives was lost in. None of her crew except young Spark-Gap was ever heard of again, you understand. Open lifeboats didn't have a chance in that blow."

The Beachcomber reached down to rub his callous-tipped fingers over the scrap of mouldering sailcloth he had used as a canvas for his Ghost Ship chart.

"The only souvenir I got of the old *Vamoose*, other than her logbook that old Gil Tinker down at Long Beach salvaged an' give to me years later, is this scrap of canvas part of her jibs'l that I found hangin' from the old schooner's bowsprit the year I first come to the beach. That was two years before I decided to build The Wreckage, usin' logs an' suchlike offn the beach."

Trudy Galt asked skeptically, "Are you kidding us, Beachie? Was there really such a person as Spark-Gap Gallagher? I've heard my grandfather tell about him, but I never believed it."

The Beachcomber chuckled. "The *Vamoose* was wrecked afore my time a couple of years, Trudy honey, but it was from Gramps Pearson that I first heard about Spark-Gap—how the lifesavin' crew boarded the hulk the mornin' after the storm, an' found young Spark-Gap a ravin' lunatic lashed to the stanchion, hollerin' over an' over again like the lunatic he was, 'CQD, CQD, schooner *Vamoose*, foundering off Leadbetter Point.'"

"Mr. Beachcomber," Tommy asked, "whatever became of Spark-Gap Gallagher? If he ever existed?"

The old man's spark-blue eyes twinkled behind a wreath of curling tobacco smoke.

"Like I said, he was stark, ravin' crazy when the ship come ashore.

He wouldn't leave 'er. Folks like Gramps Pearson, Trudy's kin, who was custodian of old Fort Leadbetter between the Spanish-American war an' World War II, he used to take grub down to Spark-Gap, or so he's told me many's the time. Trudy, you tell Tommy what Gramps said about Spark-Gap's end."

The girl said, "According to Gramp's version, and Gramps is the world's champion tall-tale teller, Spark-Gap saw the *Vamoose* sink out of sight under the sands. The whole north end of the peninsula is just a pudding of quicksand, you know, and the *Vamoose* was a steel ship, and carried lots of ballast in her hold."

"Anyway, what happened?" Noisy cut in testily. "Don't take so long to get to the point."

Ignoring Noisy's interruption, saving her own role of storyteller, Trudy Galt said, "One cold, foggy morning about a year after the *Vamoose* sank from sight under the sands, Gramps said he saw Spark-Gap Gallagher's tracks heading out into the surf, with the tide going out and the undertow something awful up there. The next tide brought in Spark-Gap's wool knit cap and the driftwood cane he used, and that was all. He'd committed suicide. Gramps says to this day he thinks Spark-Gap imagined he saw the *Vamoose*'s lifeboats out in the waves and was wading out to join his shipmates."

"Beachcomber," Noisy suddenly breached the vacuum of silence, "I've got exciting news for you. Tommy and me found Spark-Gap's old-fashioned wireless antenna in the driftwood this mornin'. Didn't we, Tommy?"

Tommy stiffened, a sickish sensation clawing at the pit of his stomach. There Noisy went again, blabbing everything he knew.

"How's that, boy?" the Beachcomber asked, snatching his briar pipe from his toothless gums. "Spark-Gap's antenna?"

Tommy said hoarsely, "Noisy's just joking, Mr. Beachcomber. After all these years there wouldn't be any trace of the Spark-Gap antenna. The copper would have corroded to nothing by now.

Beachcomber's narrowed blue eyes flicked from Tommy to Noisy and back again. His pipe hung suspended in front of his beard; his gnarled fist was rock-steady.

"What makes you think it was the *Vamoose* antenna, son?" the old man asked. "That would make a prime specimen for my Wreckage museum, if you could prove it come off that ship."

Noisy, catching the distress signals in Tommy's eyes, tried to cover

up. He sensed that he had said too much, but had no idea what.

"Aw, it wasn't Spark-Gap Gallagher's antenna, Beachie," the boy mumbled confusedly. "For one thing, the lead-in goin' down into the ground was RG8U coaxial cable, and they didn't have that invented in Spark-Gap's time, I know that."

"Coaxial cable going into the ground?" Trudy Galt asked, her own curiosity aroused now. "Where, Noisy?"

"Aw," Noisy said uncomfortably, "it was just a hunk of coax tangled up in a dead cedar, running to a funny-looking antenna hid in some roots. Looked like a toy TV Yagi inside of a brass bird cage, close up. I—"

A car drove past outside at high speed. The sound of its motor, barely louder than the ever-present hum of the surf through the dormer window which Tommy had opened, brought the Californian leaping to his feet.

He was in time to see Uncle JC's maroon station wagon streaking over the plank bridge of the Ocean Park slough, headed for Alderedge at the end of the lane.

"That's my uncle, getting back from a shopping trip," Tommy exclaimed. "He's W7OE—could I bring him to the party, Mr. Beachcomber?"

The old man nodded. "O' course he's welcome, son. Don't you remember I invited you both last night?"

With a hasty apology to Trudy, K6ATX raced down the stairs, ducked through the crowd of picnicking radio hams in the front room and hurried outdoors. A moment later he was in his own car, heading down the sand road after his uncle.

He skidded to a halt in front of Alderedge just as JC Ellison was unlocking the front door, which Tommy had left before breakfast this morning.

"What's wrong, Tommy?" JC called out anxiously, meeting his nephew halfway from the front gate.

"Unk, I've seen Blackjack Gorin face to face," Tommy blurted, "and I think I've located the omnidirectional EHF antenna he uses for his microwave station!"

A look of utter incredulity crossed JC Ellison's face.

"Tommy, if I didn't know you better I'd say you were joking."

"It's no joke, Unk, believe me! Listen..."

As concisely as he knew how, Tommy outlined his day's adven-

tures in company with the irrepressible Noisy Noyce, who had played a key part in all of them.

“And,” he would up breathlessly, “just five minutes or so ago I heard that the station Gorin was talking to—the *Vamoose*—is the same name as a ghost ship that lies buried at the exact spot where that waveguide disappears underground!”

The corners of JC’s mouth twitched. “Well, we know we can’t get on the air and call ‘CQ Ghost Ship!’ and expect Gorin to come back. Let’s go, Tommy.”

A moment later they were hopping into the station wagon and JC was checking the cartridge clip in the .45 Colt automatic pistol he kept in a concealed holster under his sports jacket.

“Where are we going? What are we going to do?” Tommy asked excitedly, as his detective uncle stepped on the gas.

“To Stackpole Harbor,” JC clipped, “to arrest Gorin—if he’s still there.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Driftwood Mystery

The needle of JC Ellison's speedometer wavered between eighty-five and ninety on much of the lonely bayshore road between Nahcotta and Oysterville. The station wagon was slowing for the turn north onto the Stackpole Harbor road when they heard the sharp wail of the siren and saw, in the rearview mirror, the ominous blinking of a red flashing light.

"Speed cops—in these backwoods?" groaned JC, braking to a halt. "That's one thing I hadn't counted on."

Tommy said, "Tell him you're an officer, Unk, or he might delay us for an hour. It's a State highway patrolman, not a—"

"No!" JC cut in sharply. "I don't want to identify myself as a detective just yet—that would involve exposing all this business about Gorin and his pirate syndicate. No—we'll pose as vacationists and take our medicine."

The siren's wail died out, but the red spotlight kept on flashing as the patrolman's long black sedan with its police emblem on the door halted behind them. A heavy-set and beef-red officer stepped out, looking grim.

"Glad it wasn't my sports car and California plates," Tommy remarked under his breath. "Good luck, Unk."

The perspiring highway patrolman cuffed back his visored cap and leaned his elbows on the window ledge beside JC.

"You were clocked by radar at better than eighty-five miles an hour," the officer announced. "You're lucky I don't smell any booze on your breath, mister. There isn't any fire up this way. They pulled up the tracks of the narrow gauge railroad in '30, so don't tell me

you were hurrying to catch a train.”

With a heavy sigh, Uncle JC took out his wallet and presented the officer with his operator’s license before the latter could demand it.

“I observe,” the officer continued coldly but politely, “that you are a radio ham, by your license plates. An Extra Class too, judging by the two-letter call. So perhaps it may interest you to know that this particular speed trap, if you want to call it that, was triggered by short-wave radio, Mr.”—he consulted the name on the driver’s license—“Mr. Ellison.”

“Oh?” JC said.

“A housewife on Joe Johns Avenue saw this maroon wagon streak past like a low-flying airplane, she said. She telephoned Ilwaco, and the police operator notified me by short wave that you’d been last seen headed north on the Oysterville road.”

JC nodded. “Very good teamwork on the part of the housewife, the Ilwaco telephone operator and yourself. If you wouldn’t mind filling out that ticket—I’m in a hurry and it’s urgent.”

The officer wet his pencil on his tongue. “Obviously you’re in a hurry. Where you going in such a hurry, Mr. Ellison? There’s nothing up this Sherwood Forest road that hasn’t been here for fifty years at least, and it won’t be gone when you get there.”

JC squirmed uncomfortably at the wheel. “As a matter of fact, officer, I’m trying to catch a tugboat before it pulls out of Stackpole Harbor.”

The highway patrolman stopped writing. Pencil poised, he said, “If it’s Waygart’s tug *Skookum*, her diesels are torn down for repairs.”

“As a matter of fact,” JC explained, “it isn’t the boat itself I’m in a hurry to reach; it’s a person aboard it. Ah—a matter of business with Waygart Brothers’ bookkeeper, to be exact.”

Interest flashed in the patrolman’s eyes at this news.

“You’re referring to Curly Winn, I suppose?”

When JC did not answer, Tommy Rockford said “Yes, sir, that’s the man. He’s living on the *Skookum*.”

The officer chuckled over some secret joke. “Well, you’re too late,” he said. “Curly—but see for yourself. He’s the last ticket I made out this morning, ahead of yours. And for the same violation—excessive speed and reckless driving.”

Thrusting his ticket book through the window for JC to see the stub of the last traffic violator in his book, the police said, “William

Winn... mailing address Waygart Brothers Oyster Cannery, Nahcotta... driving his motorcycle at speeds in excess of one hundred miles per hour on road between Stackpole Harbor and the Oysterville road..."

Tommy stifled a groan. The time this officer had stopped "Curly Winn," according to the traffic tag, was 12:05 PM.

"Almost exactly at the time you and I were in contact from Noisy's QTH, Unk," Tommy whispered. "I left the *Skookum* about twenty minutes to twelve. So Blackj—so Mr. Winn must have come ashore immediately, got his yellow Honda out of the shed—"

The officer seemed to take an interminably long time to fill out the ticket, charging JC with breaking the state speed laws and requiring that he post bail in South Bend not later than the following Friday. He listed the driver as "cooperative."

"Did—did Mr. Winn give you any idea where he was going in such a hurry?" JC Ellison asked the officer when the dreary business was finished. There was no longer any need to hurry.

"That he did," the officer replied. "He said he was trying to make a one o'clock dentist's appointment in Astoria. I told him if he didn't slow down he wouldn't get as far as the funeral parlors at Long Beach, halfway to the Columbia River interstate bridge, otherwise he wouldn't know it when the coroner stuffed him into a body bag and took him off to the morgue."

At long last the officer had backed his car off the road and driven away. To Tommy Rockford's surprise, his uncle resumed their drive northward toward Stackpole Harbor.

"That means Blackjack Gorin's had time to have crossed the Columbia River bridge" Tommy said in despair. "He's probably halfway into Oregon by now. I—I guess this blows up the whole case, Unk, and my fault."

JC, his eyes shining like polished gunsights, shook his head. "Astoria," he said, "is the last place in the world Gorin was headed for. He wouldn't have tipped off a state patrolman what his plans were, you can bank on that."

"Then where was he headed?"

JC shrugged. "I wouldn't pretend to know. He must have henchmen on the peninsula. You boys obviously jolted him when Noisy mentioned that antenna in the driftwood. I have a hunch that hit close to home. If his hidden transmitter is somewhere around that area,

we'll find it."

Tommy said, "I wish you'd have shown that policeman your detective credentials. He could have helped you put a roadblock out, sent an all-points bulletin or something, to pick up a redheaded man on a yellow Honda."

The Stackpole Harbor road sped by; they were hitting sixty on the sand road through Sherwood Forest's gloomy tunnel. They could see the single track of "Curly Winn's" motorcycle from time to time in the west rut ahead of them.

"If Curly Winn is Blackjack Gorin—and I'm ready to accept your word that he is—then I don't think he'll pull stakes without taking his radio equipment with him," JC said. "Or at any rate, destroying it. He may go into hiding so as to delay us a longer period—maybe observe radio silence for a few weeks or months—if he's sufficiently scared that you and Noisy were onto some secret of his. But my hunch is that he won't skip the country, at least not until he's had time to see what develops."

A few moments later they were braking to a halt alongside the motorcycle shed at the rim of Stackpole Harbor. Its door was unlocked and hanging open. The yellow Honda was gone.

The *Skookum* and its brood of squat, flat-decked oyster bateaux, which had been sitting on mud bottom at low tide, were now straining at their anchor chains and buoy hawsers; the tide had filled Stackpole to the brim, floating the rowboats tied to their boom. With them was Gorin's launch from the *Skookum*.

"Are we going out to the tug?" Tommy asked, excitement beginning to spur up his pulses. "With Gorin gone, we might be able to find the radio gear he was using this morning, or pick up some fingerprints and stuff that would confirm his identity."

JC climbed out of the station wagon, followed by Tommy.

"You say we're directly opposite this Haunted Fort place, due east of this bird-cage antenna gadget you and the kid found in the driftwood?"

"Yes. It couldn't be more than a mile to the west of us. The *Skookum* signal on the Snooper-Loop came in at 88°, just two degrees north of due east."

JC reached into the car, unlocked a cabinet, and drew out an instrument that Tommy recognized as a duplicate of his own direction finder for 60,080 megahertz, which he had left in his car at Alderedge.

"We can inspect the *Skookum* later," his uncle said briskly. "Right now, I'm most interested in looking at this bird-cage antenna with the toy TV Yagi inside. Especially if the Snooper-Loop gives us a signal reading showing that the transmitter it's connected to is in operation."

JC Ellison unlocked the station wagon one more time. He filled his pockets with .45 cartridges for the Colt automatic he wore in a concealed holster under his left armpit.

"What if Gorin comes back and finds the car here at Stackpole Harbor?" Tommy wanted to know.

"We can't hide it, and we can't drive up the beach with the tide in," his uncle said, starting along the brushy shore of the cove in search of some kind of opening in the undergrowth. "Besides, I don't want to waste any time getting that mystery antenna inspected."

The primeval forest grew tall and forbiddingly dark to the very edge of the bay. There were no logging roads in the area, but deer, bear and other game abounded on the peninsula, and one of their trails finally led them into the thick of the timber, west bound. As long as the game trail lasted they could make fair headway on the thick pad of dusty brown pine needles and sphagnum moss which had been centuries in the forming.

A hundred yards from the shore they came to a fern-tangled clearing where some enterprising boys' camp project had flourished in years past, with tree houses built twenty feet off the ground for bunkhouses, reached by rope ladders through trapdoors. Beyond a faded signboard reading CAMP ELLIOT, EST. 1923 a trail of sorts led off into dank, moss-festooned jungle that shut out all view of the sky, so that although it was only midafternoon, they would have had to light a match to read a compass.

"Trail's veering too far south; we want to go west," JC said finally. "From here on to your Haunted Fort we'll have to blaze our own trail, Tommy. And for your information, there are no poisonous snakes or poison oak or ivy on the peninsula."

Both were in the pink physically, so the going wasn't too rough. They climbed successive sand ridges, which marked the various limits of the peninsula as it had built up toward the ocean in bygone centuries. Between these corrugations were valleys bottomed with small lakes where oily black water covered scummy quickmire. They skirted these bottomless traps, sinking knee-deep in wild cranberry bogs, before

climbing to a plateau where the wind cleared away the droning clouds of mosquitoes and brought the roar of the surf to their ears again.

Gartersnakes and bullfrogs were everywhere underfoot; the air was cloyed with the heady smell of decaying vegetation.

"That waveguide you found dipping underground may lead a long way north or south of the antenna," JC panted as they began clawing their way through dense barriers of salal and blackberry. It was doubtful if anyone, Indians included, had ever fought through this tangle.

Suddenly they broke through the fernbrake into a clearing. Directly ahead of them loomed a large concrete-walled building with a sheet metal roof. It had no windows, but its double iron doors, scabbed with rust where the battleship-gray paint had weathered away, were padlocked shut. A sign over the door was barely legible under the overlapping layers of graffiti:

POWERHOUSE — 1864

W.C. PEARSON, CUSTODIAN

INQUIRE OCEAN PARK POSTOFFICE

"This, I presume, is your Haunted Fort Pillbox?" JC asked, mopping his forehead with a sleeve. "If so, your Ocean Park postmaster apparently has custody of the keys."

"It must be one of the surface buildings of Fort Leadbetter," Tommy panted, "but we're still inland from the Pillbox. According to Noisy Noyce, most of the fort is underground, like bomb shelters, and connected with subterranean passageways."

They rounded the northeast corner of the Powerhouse, seeing a narrow path through the jackpines opening in a westerly direction ahead of them. But a new discovery arrested their attention—a complete map of the Fort Leadbetter installation painted on the north wall of the windowless Powerhouse.

Surface buildings—all of them torn down and carted away, apparently, with the exception of the Powerhouse—were indicated in white paint, and included emplacements for artillery batteries, a quadrangle of barracks for the garrison, administration building and mess hall, and two "Observation Posts," one of which, at the extreme western edge of the fort, Tommy knew must be the octagonal structure on the West Dune that Noisy called the "Pillbox."

Another map was superimposed on the white symbols, this one

done in red paint, and represented the underground portions of the Fortress—tunnels and powder magazines and a first-aid station where wounded men could be treated during a bombardment.

"This Powerhouse building seems to be the entrance to all the underground passages," Tommy commented. "One of the tunnels connects with the Pillbox."

JC was too preoccupied with other thoughts to pay much attention to the ground plan of a Coast Artillery installation that had never fired a shot in anger at an enemy. He started on toward the path leading toward the beach, Tommy at his heels.

"Hey, Unk—I just got a brilliant idea!" Tommy said excitedly. "This old abandoned fort would be an ideal hideout for Blackjack Gorin's secret radio station! He naturally wouldn't want his antenna system underground, so he could run a buried cable down to the driftwood where he hid that bird-cage gadget."

JC failed to agree.

"It's too obvious, Tommy. Too many sightseers probably snoop around the Haunted Fort, judging from all the names and initials scribbled on the wall of the Powerhouse back there. Besides, this is still government property, and I imagine the FBI has explored every inch of this fort by now."

Tommy was too deflated with disappointment over JC's rejection of his idea to say anything more. The path led for fifty yards through a dense thicket of salal brush and wild blackberries, and ended suddenly at the brink of the sand ridge overlooking the beach.

Squinting their eyes against the sun glare on the slate-gray Pacific, the two of them saw the octagonal walls of the Pillbox alongside them on the north. To their surprise, a brisk wind was blowing down here on the open beach, stinging their faces with a peppery barrage of sandy particles.

"See that cedar tree sticking up at a forty-five degree angle yonder, with the roots uppermost?" Tommy said, pointing down across the grassy expanse of dune area to where the barrier of driftwood lay.

"Yeah—I've spotted it." For the first time, JC's voice held a vibrant note of excitement.

"Well, the bird-cage antenna's inside those roots, Unk, with the waveguide leading up through a natural crack in the trunk. No one would have spotted it in a thousand years, just poking around. You have to be within arm's reach of the antenna itself to see it, and the

cable was completely hidden, too. The only reason we located it was because the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop indicated such a strong RF signal coming from that direction.”

Uncle JC was already half-running, half-sliding down the steep western face of the sand ridge below the Pillbox. Tommy bounded along behind him in a miniature avalanche of salt and pepper colored sand, and then they were heading out across the grass-tufted dunes toward the driftwood.

The wind whipped their hair into their faces, and half blinded them with stinging grit. They were halfway to the upthrust cedar tree—their goal—when Tommy saw Uncle JC draw his .45 automatic and drop to a crouch, his lips moving soundlessly as the wind whipped the words away.

Tommy fell flat, catching the urgency of JC’s gesture as his uncle pointed with his pistol barrel in the direction of the driftwood.

Two figures were silhouetted against the sun’s glare, one of them standing at the base of the cedar where the waveguide cable disappeared underground, the other shinnying his way up the sloping dead tree toward the camouflaged antenna.

“We’re in luck,” JC shouted in Tommy’s ear. “That’ll be Gorin and a confederate, most likely, making sure nobody finds that mystery antenna. Keep low, Tommy, and stay back. I’m going after ’em and there will probably be shooting.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JC Maps Strategy

Tommy wriggled to the shelter of a fragment of ship's hull planking that jutted from a nearby dune, knowing the oaken barrier would stop a stray bullet but still give him a vantage point to witness his heroic detective uncle in action.

As yet the two figures in the driftwood had not spotted JC, it would seem. Indeed, with the wind whipping long gray scarves of flying sand from the rippled crests of the dunes, JC had a ready-made smokescreen to shield him from gunfire.

A groan of dismay escaped Tommy's lips in the next moment when the wind died off abruptly, lowering the sand curtains and giving him a distinct view of the two figures, who seemed to be inspecting the dead cedar tree. They weren't gangsters!

Jumping out from behind his flotsam shelter, waving his arms wildly to attract his uncle's attention, Tommy headed over to where JC, gun palmed, was wriggling snake-fashion behind a driftlog.

"Unk, those aren't gangsters!" Tommy shouted, dropping to his knees alongside JC Ellison. "The one on the ground is the Beachcomber, and the one shinnying up the tree is the kid I was telling you about, Noisy Noyce!"

The taut look on JC's face smoothed out. Utter disgust was written all over him as he thrust his automatic pistol back into its concealed scabbard and got to his feet.

"I don't like it one bit," JC said, "that old man and the kid prowling around. This could crab the whole act if they spread the news up and down the peninsula."

A moment later the old Beachcomber spotted them approaching and lifted an arm in greeting. He yelled something to Noisy, who came sliding back down the cedar bole.

As JC and Tommy joined them at the base of the slanting cedar the Beachcomber shouted above the howl of the wind, "Are you two up here for the same reason we are—to check up on that wild tale of Noisy's about a mysterious radio antenna with a lead-in going underground where the *Vamoose* sank, Mr. Ellison?"

Tommy shot the loquacious Noisy a murderous look behind the old man's back. The little blabbermouth had not only spilled their secret, but had led the Beachcomber all the way from his ham club picnic to investigate!

JC grinned to cover his seething anger. "My nephew here was all excited about it—said he thought it might be the antenna of the first ship ever to send out an SOS on this coast."

The Beachcomber laughed and turned to run a scraggy hand through Noisy's hair, tousling it affectionately.

"In any case, it appears to have been a practical joke the boys were playing on us, Mr. Ellison," he said.

JC and Tommy exchanged puzzled glances.

"What do you mean, a practical joke?" JC demanded.

Beachcomber shrugged. "Their yarn about finding an antenna hidden at the top of this cedar just wasn't true, that's what I mean."

Tommy Rockford's mouth sagged open in dismay. "Isn't true? Of course it's true! Noisy and I saw the bird cage up in those roots. Noisy almost cut the coax in two with his knife."

Noisy had not spoken up to now. For the first time, Tommy saw that the Nervous Novice was very nervous indeed—and that his cheeks were tear-streaked.

"I guess we were seeing things this morning, Tommy," the boy whimpered, "because the antenna and the coax cable are gone."

For an instant Tommy stared at Noisy, unable to believe his ears. Then brushing past JC and the Beachcomber, he dropped to his knees at the spot where the dead cedar jutted up from the sand and started feeling around with his hands.

But the black waveguide tubing he had seen and touched a few hours before had vanished. The long transverse crack in the cedar bole was still there, but it was empty.

Springing erect, Tommy started to straddle the cedar bole, with

the intention of climbing up to the roots where he had seen the cunningly concealed bird cage with the miniature TV antenna inside. But Noisy reached out to grab his sleeve.

"No use getting splinters in your legs, Tommy. The bird cage isn't there. And—Beachie thinks I made it all up."

The Beachcomber turned to JC and shrugged.

"What do *you* think, Mr. Ellison? When you and Tommy didn't come back to The Wreckage, but drove on by like the world was on fire or something, Noisy said he bet you were coming up here to look at Spark-Gap Gallagher's wireless antenna. And since I'm always on the lookout for things for my museum, I hopped on my motorcycle and brought Noisy up here to show me what he'd found. I found exactly nothing. How can I help but think Noisy lied?"

Tommy saw JC gesture for him to keep silence, and assumed his uncle meant about the discovery of the microwave RF signals. JC's lips, unseen by the Beachcomber, framed four syllables which Tommy read: "Blackjack Gorin!"

The whole explanation for the mystery of the vanishing antenna was crystal clear to these two: Blackjack Gorin had come over here on his motorcycle—picking up a speeding ticket en route—at about the same time Tommy was getting in contact with JC up in Aberdeen via ham radio. Gorin had made certain that curious boys wouldn't find his secret antenna if they came back again. The sea breeze had wiped out his footprints in minutes.

"If it's a practical joke, it isn't a very funny one," JC said, scowling at Noisy. "As a radio ham, Mr. Beachcomber, I thought I was really going to see something interesting."

The bearded oldster scowled reprovingly at Noisy, who looked as if he wanted the earth to swallow him up.

"We on the Peninsula overlook Noisy's shenanigans as a rule, but it wasn't very kind of you, son, taking me away from the Wreckage."

Tears streamed from the twelve-year-old's eyes as he turned imploringly to Tommy Rockford.

"Tell Beachie I ain't lyin', Tommy! You saw it! You know it was there this mornin'!"

Tommy said, "It was—probably hidden in the roots of some other chunk of driftwood, Noisy," he improvised, stalling for time. "I mean, this cedar is just one of a million chunks of wood in this log jam."

"No, no!" Noisy screamed frantically. "It was due west of the Haunted Fort, you know that! It—look! Look!" Noisy sprang forward to where sunlight glinted on bright metal in the sand a few feet away. Snatching it up, Noisy turned triumphantly to face them. "See, it's my Scout knife that I dropped—remember, Tommy? You wouldn't let me stick around to hunt for it!"

Noisy had proved his point conclusively. JC tried to divert the subject away from the vanished antenna by saying to the old man, "Tommy told me your legend about Spark-Gap Gallagher, Mr. Beachcomber. I remember hearing it myself when I visited Ocean Park years ago, as a child. I understand you're the local authority on ghost ship lore?"

The Beachcomber nodded modestly.

"That's what they say, Mr. Ellison. I don't blame the boys for being interested when they found out the *Vamoose* sank under the sands at this very spot many years ago. And when I told them the story about Spark-Gap, the wireless operator, I guess that put the idea into their heads—that the antenna they found in the driftwood belonged to the *Vamoose*."

"Then you *do* believe," Noisy cut in, "we saw an antenna?"

"Of course, son," the Beachcomber chuckled. "The fact it's gone isn't so mysterious, really. Somebody prowling through the driftwood found it since you were here this morning and took it away. I'm sorry, too, because it would have made an interesting curio for the Wreckage museum, whatever it was."

JC gestured toward the driftwood tangle.

"Where do you suppose Spark-Gap Gallagher's ghost ship would be, Mr. Beachcomber?" he asked. "If there's any trace of it still showing above ground, like a mast or a bowsprit or something, I'd like to see it."

The Beachcomber shook his head.

"The *Vamoose* had sunk to the scuppers when I got here, two years after the wreck," he said, "and by the time I had built The Wreckage, it was gone. I know, because I wanted to get a porthole off its deckhouse to decorate my front door with."

JC's eyes flashed with interest. "How far down would the *Vamoose* have sunk by now, do you think? I've always been fascinated by ghost ships and the like. I remember seeing the wrecks of the *Admiral Benson* and the *Laurel* on Peacock Spit, this side of the

Columbia River jetty, when I was a kid.”

The Beachcomber was obviously anxious to get started back, explaining that he was the host for the PARK clamfest and had left his guests without excusing himself.

“We’ll talk about ghost ships on our way back to Haunted Fort, where I left the motorcycle,” he said. “The *Vamoose*? She’d keep settling in the sand till she hit bedrock. That could be anywhere from a hundred to two hundred feet, according to those men that took soundings for oil companies back in 1947. During the Second World War, when the Coast Guard beach patrol was quartered at Fort Leadbetter, I tried to get the commanding officer to see if his modern mine detection equipment would locate the *Vamoose*’s metal hull, but he wasn’t interested in ghost ships; just Jap submarines.”

They crossed the sand dunes with the wind whipping their backs, and scrambled up the ridge past the Pillbox to reach the secluded quiet of the forest trail.

Arrived at the Powerhouse once more, Tommy Rockford noticed a narrow dirt road leading up to the fort reservation from the south—a narrow sand road which evidently paralleled the one to Stackpole Harbor, a mile east.

The last hundred yards of the road was nearly blocked to travel by windfallen tree trunks. At the southernmost deadfall they caught sight of the Beachcomber’s ramshackle side-car motorcycle, which had brought him and Noisy up from Ocean Park.

“If we’d known about that road,” JC muttered, “we’d have saved ourselves a nasty hike, eh Tommy?”

“We wondered where you’d parked the station wagon,” Noisy commented. “We were afraid maybe you tried making it up the beach with the tide against you.”

“We’re over at Stackpole Harbor,” Tommy explained.

The Beachcomber, who despite his more than eighty years was not even breathing fast from their arduous walk up from the driftwood at meander line, stared at JC and Tommy in amazement.

“You hiked all the way around the Point from Stackpole? Why, that’s all of four miles—and windy as all tarnation!”

JC pointed ruefully to their scratched faces and frayed clothing.

“We hiked across the peninsula—sand hills, forest jungles, finger lakes, cranberry swamps and all. But it was fun.”

The Beachcomber waggled his head in astonishment. “You call

that fun! Years ago, I prospected for chittim bark in there. I ran across black bear and cougar and mosquitoes as big as seagulls."

Noisy said, "Beachie will take you back to your car in his motorbike, Mr. Ellison. Tommy and me can hike across through the forest."

"With you barefooted?" JC laughed. "Not a chance. Say, Mr. Beachcomber—I'd like to explore those underground passages of the Haunted Fort some time. Any chance?"

The old man shook his head. "Too dangerous—cave-ins, flooded tunnels. Trudy Galt's grandfather, the postmaster, is the civilian custodian of the military reservation. He's got keys to the Powerhouse and the other locked doors underground. Fort Leadbetter's been closed to the public for a long time, though."

A few more minutes of chatting and they separated, JC and Tommy plunging back into the brambled forest toward Stackpole Harbor, Noisy and the old man to remount their motorcycle and head back home.

"We're sure doing this the hard way," Tommy groaned, as they fought their way through the salal and berry brush. "I hope the Beachcomber was kidding us about those black bears."

JC panted, "He wasn't. These woods are alive with deer and bear and cougar, which is why I'm glad I've got my .45. But the main thing is, I don't want to have to keep on talking about that disappearing antenna. Especially knowing that Noisy has knowledge of our Super-Duper direction finder, and by now he's probably blabbed that information to the old man."

Stumbling along through the semidarkness, ankle-deep now in a wild cranberry bog fringing a fresh water lake swarming with ducks, Tommy panted out, "You're suspicious that the Beachcomber may be one of Gorin's men, spying on us?"

To Tommy's surprise, JC shook his head.

"Last night, after what you told me about the old boy copying code behind his beard, I was worried," he admitted. "So I checked with the FBI in Seattle by long distance from Aberdeen. They've checked out the old codger. During World War II the Coast Guard had lookouts quartered at your Haunted Fort, patrolling the beach against saboteur landings, and the Beachcomber was on the civilian payroll."

"You mean the FBI's satisfied the Beachcomber is Okay?"

"Sure—just a harmless old duffer. But talkative. That's why I

don't want to get roped into discussions about your mystery antenna."

Wading free of the swamp, they began climbing the second of the series of sand ridges which corrugated the North Beach Peninsula in a north-south direction.

"You think Gorin made off with it this afternoon?"

"It would seem so. In fact, Tommy, I'd bet my bottom dollar that Blackjack Gorin was hiding somewhere in the edge of the forest, or possibly in the driftwood up or down the beach, watching the four of us."

Tommy felt his stomach muscles knot up. If Gorin had been lurking nearby, he could have cut them all down with a machine gun, as easy as pie.

"You don't think he skipped the country on his motorcycle?"

JC didn't answer that one until they were breaking into the open at Stackpole Harbor.

"I think the first thing he'll do—when it gets dark—is reconnect that antenna to wherever his transmitter is hidden," was JC's startling answer. "He's had a bad scare this afternoon, but he'll want to get his station on the air as soon as possible to alert the syndicate that maybe things are getting too hot for comfort up here."

Tommy thought that over on the way back to their waiting car. Gorin's motorcycle shed, he noticed in passing, was still empty.

"Then it's tonight or never, you think, so far as trapping Blackjack Gorin is concerned?"

Climbing behind the wheel of the station wagon, JC nodded.

"Tonight or never—that sums up my opinion, yes. So here's the strategy I've mapped out for us, Tommy. Assuming you want to be in on this job at the payoff."

"Try and stop me, Unk!"

"Okay. The way I figure it, when Blackjack Gorin comes out of hiding tonight he'll return to one of two places, or both. Either the *Skookum*, where he may have remote-control microwave gear to trigger his big transmitter, or down on the beach, where he'd set up his antenna again. Either place, Blackjack Gorin is going to meet his finish."

They were driving back down the road toward Oysterville now. The sky was flecked with rose-gold clouds tinted by the setting sun. It was hard to realize that at this time yesterday they weren't even across the strait from Canada yet. How much adventure could a

teenager crowd into twenty-four hours, anyway? And the climax of that adventure was still ahead.

"So here's my plan," JC went on. "We'll each take our own car. You'll hide out at Stackpole Harbor, in case Gorin has to get back aboard the *Skookum* for any reason. I'll hide out in that Pillbox overlooking the beach at Haunted Fort—where I can see him if he tries to string up that antenna of his. According to the tide book there's a full moon out tonight."

Tommy gulped.

"What if I saw Gorin's motorcycle coming up this road?" he asked. "How could I let you know, if you were in the Pillbox a mile away, and not in your car?"

Uncle JC gestured to the locker behind the seat.

"We've both got two-meter FM synthesized hand-helds," he said. "We'll keep in touch with each other by ham radio, reporting in on regular schedules. We'll have to gamble that Gorin isn't monitoring the amateur bands tonight."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Vigil by Two-Meter Radio

By nine o'clock the stars were out and Ocean Park's main street began to twinkle with the rainbow colors of neon signs proclaiming Beulah's Gift Shoppe, Art's Tavern and a gas station.

JC's station wagon and Tommy's sports car pulled out of the Alderedge yard ten minutes apart and headed northward. They would probably be out all night—a circumstance that might be noticed if Gorin had a spy keeping them under surveillance—so JC had gone to elaborate plans to advertise their coming absence to the town. Because there would be a good clam tide that night, he and Tommy dropped by Dick's Variety Store at dusk and rented two screen-bottom surf buckets, a crab rake and two “clam guns,” as Ocean Parkers called the long-bladed, bent-handled clam shovels. Many tourists were renting similar equipment tonight, so it was perfectly natural that JC and Tommy would be away from home.

Before they ate supper, Tommy repaired the broken solder joint in his mobile transmitter. He was busy fixing Noisy's damage to the rig when Trudy Galt drove by and gave him a difficult moment or two.

It seemed that the young people's group at the Community Church were throwing a big beach party tonight—a marshmallow roast, clam-bake and hot dog feast rolled into one—and Trudy knew the gang would love to meet K6ATX from California.

“You won't find any pretty girls running with the ham gang,” Trudy had baited him good-naturedly.

“What do you call yourself?” Tommy retorted gallantly, and begged off by explaining that he had a ten o'clock schedule to keep on ten meters—giving Trudy the impression he was going to be call-

ing his home town for a phone patch to his dad and mother.

JC's final instructions, just before they left Alderedge, covered the night to come:

"Your job, Tommy, is to stash yourself there at Stackpole Harbor where you can watch the approach road and the bay at the same time. I understand Curly Winn keeps a launch at the Nahcotta moorage basin and he might head back to the *Skookum* in that. If you see or hear his motorcycle approaching you'll know it three or four miles away and can flash me the word so I can have a roadblock set up by the police."

"And if you spot him stringing up his bird-cage antenna on the beach, will you let me know?"

"Right. I'll be using the Haunted Fort Pillbox for my lookout. We'll both keep our two-meter rigs on at all times, as well as our Snooper-Loops—just in case Gorin sets up his antenna somewhere else and gets his station on the air. Then we'd need each other to get a fix on the new location."

It was 9:20 by Tommy's watch when he reached Stackpole Harbor, after having first examined the tire marks on the sand road to make sure Gorin had not returned during their absence, either by car or motorcycle.

He backed the car into a dense thicket of salal brush, facing the road in case he needed a quick getaway, and headed on foot for the spot on the curved shoreline of the cove he had chosen for his vigil.

He was wearing his heavy football sweatshirt with parka hood as protection against the night chill, and had loaned a similar garment to Uncle JC to wear inside the Pillbox.

On his way, Tommy checked Gorin's shed to make sure the Honda was still gone. It was. There was enough starlight for him to see the low, black shapes of the oyster company's string of barges, with the *Skookum* moored on the bay side of them. Nothing had changed.

Sitting down on the flat-topped stump he had chosen for his vigil post, Tommy set up the direction finder where he could use it at an instant's notice. Switching on the two-meter hand-held radio, he turned the audio gain up to full volume, making a miniature loudspeaker out of the built-in earphone.

Then he settled down for the tedious wait ahead, knowing he couldn't get a wink of sleep tonight, and also knowing there was a good chance that nothing at all would happen. If Blackjack Gorin

had been frightened badly enough to skip out for good, pausing only to dismantle his driftwood antenna, they might not be sure of it for days or weeks.

The *Skookum* swung on her anchors to the shift of tide and pull of currents. On the eastern shore lights crawled in slow motion, auto traffic on Highway 101 for Aberdeen and Tacoma. A big ship, probably a freighter, crawled around the Bruceport headland on its way from the Willapa River toward the ocean bar.

The arrangement was for Tommy to call JC every half hour, JC to call Tommy every hour on the hour. At 9:30, Tommy lifted the hand-held—about the size and shape of a pocket instamatic camera—thumbed the press-to-talk button and said hardly louder than a whisper, “K6ATX/7 to W7OE, all set.”

His uncle’s voice issued from the earphone: “Roger, K6ATX/7. Am in haybarn, antenna out the window. How copy? W7OE.”

“Haybarn” was their private code word for the Haunted Fort Pillbox on the beach. JC had been dubious whether the hand-held could get out of a thick-walled concrete structure.

“Loud and clear, over.”

The half hour to ten o’clock dragged interminably for Tommy. Even when JC checked in, he had nothing whatever to report, except that the cold wind blowing through the door had prompted him to close and bolt the iron barrier from the inside. He called it “shutting the barn door.”

Another endless wait for ten-thirty, at which time Tommy reported that he had nothing to report, except “no mosquitoes yet.”

And so the long night dragged along, each fighting off a tendency to doze. At eleven o’clock, Uncle JC reported several carloads of clam-diggers busy “in front of the barn,” which Tommy understood readily enough.

One o’clock came, and two o’clock. Shortly after his “nothing new” report at two-thirty, Tommy had an exciting moment or two when he saw a pair of auto headlights shining through the tunnel-like lane of Sherwood Forest, but the car turned off at a farm where the oil paving ended, and there was no further sign of traffic on the Oyster-ville road.

The need to sleep was becoming the worst part of the ordeal, now that the suspense of waiting for Blackjack Gorin to put in an appearance had eased off somewhat. Now and then a shift in the wind would

bring to Tommy's ears the low thunder of the whitecaps on the dangerous Willapa Harbor bar and the doleful honking of the fog buoys.

Sunrise, according to the tide book almanac, would be at 4:57 AM. Tommy didn't know whether his uncle intended to give up the vigil when it got daylight or not.

When the time came for his regular 4:30 report, Tommy lifted the two-meter radio up to the side of his head to put the earpiece against his ear, the transmitter mike in position for speaking. In the act of pressing the transmit button, he was startled to hear JC come on and his voice, pitched in a hollow-sounding whisper as if he had a hand cupped over the microphone button:

"Can you hear me, Tommy?"

Tommy's heart slammed his ribs. JC hadn't gone through the usual K6ATX/7—W7OE procedure this time.

"Sure, Unk, I copy. Anything wrong?"

There was a pause, during which the sensitive microphone of JC's hand-held transceiver picked up the faint roar of the ocean coming through the observation porthole of the Pillbox.

"I'm not sure," came back the whisper. "I may be imagining things, but *I seem to hear movement outside*. . . I can't orient where it's coming from, the surf is so noisy and these eight-sided walls make for bad acoustics. Anyway, I pulled the antenna inside so the moonlight won't shine on the chrome plating."

JC switched off. Tommy said anxiously, "Is the iron door of the barn still bolted? From the inside?"

"Yes. Nothing short of an atom bomb could get me in here. . ."

There was a long pause, during which JC kept his radio on sending position. Tommy imagined his uncle was holding his breath, listening. Then the whisper, so low Tommy could hardly hear it above the static noise on the frequency, reached him:

"I'm going to set the rig on the floor and have a listen, Tommy. Stand by. Think I heard talking. QRX."

Tommy heard the faint bump of the radio case being set down on the iron floor of the Haunted Fort Pillbox.

After that he heard nothing but the ocean sounds reverberating in the echo chamber of the octagonal concrete Pillbox.

Sweat poured from Tommy's forehead, seeped into his eyelashes. His ear hurt from the pressure of holding the hand-held against it.

What was going on over there?

Suddenly a harsh voice made the receiver diaphragm rattle in Tommy's ear:

"Get your arms up, Ellison! Don't turn around!"

It was the nasal, gravel-rough voice of Blackjack Gorin, and it came from a distance from the microphone. The way it reverberated told Tommy Rockford that Gorin was inside the Pillbox, not yelling from outside.

For the space of ten breath-held seconds, Tommy heard only a confused miscellany of sounds, sounds he could not interpret.

Then Gorin's snarling voice again, "Don't get in the line of fire, Spark-Gap—"

A crash of sound that blocked Tommy's receiver and made his eardrum ring blotted out Gorin's loud-voiced order.

He put the hand-held radio phone to his other ear. The instrument was silent. JC's transceiver was not on the frequency now.

He had heard a shot. But who had fired it?

Blackjack Gorin?

Or his uncle?

And what did that "Spark-Gap" mean?

Tommy forced back a wave of panic. JC's signal had cut off, but the atmospheric in the earphone of the hand-held radio proved the instrument was receiving satisfactorily.

Tommy dared not make a transmission to ask JC what was wrong—Blackjack Gorin might be on the listening end now.

He switched on the Super-Duper direction finder and turned the loop antenna full circle without a flicker of deflection on the S meter. Gorin's pirate station wasn't on the air, then.

"I've to to get to Unk. . ."

Tommy snatched up his equipment and, muscle-sore and bone-tired from his long vigil, sprinted back to his car.

What would he find when he reached JC's Pillbox?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Disaster for K6ATX

It took only nine minutes for Tommy Rockford to cover the seven miles of dirt road to the spot near the Haunted Fort where dead-fall trees created a barrier. There was a glimmer of daylight showing, enough for him to notice Uncle JC's maroon station wagon parked behind a thicket of salal brush off the road.

Tommy headed for the Pillbox, not knowing what danger he might run into. He avoided the opening by the Powerhouse and the pathway leading to JC's hideout. Instead, Tommy cut through the underbrush and, just at daybreak, reached the high dune overlooking the beach, about fifty yards south of the Pillbox.

Nothing moved on the beach; the incoming tide had chased clam-digger traffic off the sand. He could see the upended cedar tree down amid the driftwood, and a moment's study through the binoculars told him that Blackjack Gorin had not reinstalled his mysterious bird-cage antenna.

With infinite caution Tommy Rockford approached the Pillbox, pausing frequently to look and listen. But there was only the ceaseless booming of the surf and an occasional cry of a gull to disturb the dawn hush.

He found the iron door still closed. Night winds had heaped a six-inch dune of talcum-fine sand against the base of the door, proving it had not been opened since Uncle JC locked it from within.

Creeping forward, Tommy put his eye to one of the open rivet holes in the door, dreading what he might see inside.

Enough daylight was streaming through the narrow gun slot in the front of the octagonal concrete house for Tommy to see the interior.

The Pillbox was empty, absolutely empty. Uncle JC was gone, without trace. So was his two-meter FM radio transceiver with its chromium whip antenna.

Through the hole in the door, Tommy studied the ceiling, the iron-plated floor, the concrete walls, searching for some possible opening that might have escaped his notice before. He found nothing.

Putting his mouth to the rivet hole, Tommy called JC's name. A ghostly echo answered him. He dared not shout louder, not knowing where Blackjack Gorin might be lurking.

"The only way Unk could have disappeared, leaving a building locked on the inside," Tommy forced himself to reason, "was through the tunnel leading to this Pillbox. One of those iron plates on the floor has got to be a trapdoor."

Pure fear made his stomach muscles tighten up like steel springs, but Tommy forced himself to return to the Powerhouse on the off chance he would find its padlocked door open, which would admit him to the complex subterranean workings of the Haunted Fort.

But the heavy padlock looked as if it hadn't been opened in years.

"Only thing I can do," Tommy decided frantically, "is to get the keys from Gramps Pearson. And call in the police and the FBI to find out what happened to Unk, even if it means exposing everything."

In his desperation, Tommy was too preoccupied to notice a slight change in the scenery as he returned to his car at the dead end of the Fort Leadbetter road. One tiny detail was different: Uncle JC's maroon station wagon was no longer hidden behind the salal thicket where it had been parked thirty minutes before.

When Tommy drove into Ocean Park twenty minutes later he was astonished to find the main street totally deserted. Then he realized it was only 6:15 AM. Most of the populace had been out clamming during the night and were still in bed.

Gramps lived upstairs over the post office, and there was also a public telephone booth. Tommy was debating whether to call up the state police at Ilwaco before or after rousing Gramps to get the Haunted Fort keys, as he drove up to the Ocean Park post office and parked.

As he was stepping out of the car, Trudy Galt's voice hailed Tommy from one of the second-story apartment windows above the post office: "Hi there, ATX. How was the clamming?"

Tommy looked up to see K6ZNT framed in the window. She looked stunning in a gaily colored housecoat, busy with hairbrush and handmirror.

"Uh—no luck clamming, Trudy. How was the bonfire party?"

Trudy wrinkled her nose at him. "The glamorous Noisy Noyce escorted me, since you turned me down. Need I say more?"

Tommy laughed, and then remembered that now was no time for idle chitchat with girls.

"Would you mind waking Gramps for me, Trudy?" he called up. "It's a sort of emergency, you might say."

Trudy's smile faded. "You've heard news—from Ilwaco?"

Tommy scowled with impatience. Here time was ticking away and, for all he knew, every passing minute could spell the difference between life and death for Uncle JC up at the Fort.

"What news? I've got to speak to your grandfather, Trudy. It's terribly urgent—I can't tell you why."

Trudy winced at the harshness of his tone but answered, "Gramps is in Ilwaco, Tommy. I'm not supposed to tell anybody, but he got a telephone call at 3:30 this morning from the Ilwaco hospital. Noisy's father was in jail, you know, and last night he had a stroke or something, and the police took him to the hospital." The girl swallowed hard and added, "They—they think he's dying, Tommy. I don't know what will become of Noisy."

Tommy's heart sank, both because of the bad news about Mr. Noyce, and finding Gramps out of town.

"I'm terribly sorry, Trudy," Tommy said. "When will Gramps be back?"

"The only reason he went to the hospital was because he's the only adult in Ocean Park who takes any interest in Noisy, except the Beachcomber, but he was out clamming and doesn't have a telephone anyway. Gramps rode down with the early mail truck. I'm getting dressed to drive down and pick him up."

Tommy's despair deepened. It was a thirty-mile round trip to Ilwaco. Gramps probably kept the Fort keys in the post-office safe. It would be an hour before he could get back to JC's Pillbox.

"Here comes Noisy now," Trudy called from the overhead window in a stage whisper. "Don't tell him about this, Tommy. No one is allowed to see Mr. Noyce anyway, so Gramps thought it best not to—"

Trudy was interrupted by a shrill call from down the street: "Hi,

K6ATX! How about running me down to Loomis Lake to fish?"

Tommy Rockford glanced around. Loping up the boardwalk toward the post office came Noisy, the Xtra Nervous Novice, barefooted and toting a willow fishing pole over one shoulder, like a character straight out of *Tom Sawyer*.

Trudy ducked out of sight, unable to face Noisy right now. Tommy tried to grin as Noisy trotted up.

"Sure, I'll take you to Loomis Lake," Tommy said, "if you'll wait until I make a land line call or two."

Noisy grinned wearily. "I don't know why I even speak to you, or your Uncle JC either. Both of you passed me up in a cloud of dust on the Nahcotta road this mornin'."

Tommy's heart leaped. "You say my *uncle* passed you up? When?"

"Why, a few minutes before you did, in front of Aaron Slagle's place. Both of you had the gas pedal pushed to the floorboard, didn't hear me yell at you. What was the big hurry?"

A vast relief flooded through Tommy. This was too good to be true. While he was worrying about JC Ellison lying dead in the Haunted Fort, his uncle was probably back home cooking breakfast!

"Hop in," Tommy Rockford yelled, "and we'll be on our way. I don't have to make those telephone calls after all."

A matter of moments later, Tommy was braking for the intersection of the side road that led past The Wreckage to their cottage on the beach. Turning off the highway, Tommy got a blurred glimpse of the old Beachcomber out weeding the flower beds in front of the Wreckage fence. The old man waved.

"Hey—this ain't the way to Loomis Lake!" Noisy yelled in Tommy's ear, as the car shot across the slough bridge. "It's a couple miles south, beyond the Klipsan airport!"

Tommy's heart was overwhelmed with happiness as he caught sight of his uncle's familiar station wagon parked in front of their cottage. He didn't know what had happened, but it didn't matter now. Why, he would probably find his uncle had Blackjack Gorin as his prisoner, inside Alderedge.

Ignoring Noisy's protests, Tommy halted his car alongside JC's station wagon and got out.

"Just QRX one, kid, and I'll be back in a jiffy to take you fishing," he told the bewildered Noisy. "You can even turn on the

rig if you want. Lots of DX on forty this morning."

Crossing in front of the station wagon, Tommy laid his hand on the hood. It was warm—proof that his uncle had just switched the motor off, following his drive back from the Fort.

"Unk! Hey, Unk!"

Shouting gleefully, Tommy raced up the front steps and threw open the front door.

"Unk, what on earth happened to you this m—."

He broke off, sensing danger, but too late. He had a pinched-off camera-shutter glimpse of Blackjack Gorin's face as the criminal leaped from behind the door with his upraised arm coming down in a blurred arc.

Something exploded on Tommy Rockford's temple, and he plunged headlong into a bottomless void of darkness where pain and sight and sound had no meaning.

An ammonia-soaked cotton swab pressed to his nostrils brought Tommy back to consciousness. He opened his eyes to find himself stretched out on the living room sofa, with Noisy Noyce and the old Beachcomber bending over him.

"It's all right, pal," Noisy was saying, his eyes swimming with tears. "Curly Winn knocked you out, the skunk. I saw him do it and hollered for help, so Beachie come runnin'."

Tommy struggled to a sitting position, his sore head feeling as if a hammer were hitting it with every pulsebeat. He looked around groggily, trying to pull his eyes into focus.

"Where's—my—unk—and—and Curly Winn?" he asked hoarsely.

The Beachcomber answered, "I don't think your uncle was driving his car, Tommy. Curly Winn was wearing your uncle's hooded parka for a disguise. Anyway, after he knocked you out, he might have killed you if it hadn't been for Noisy here."

"I started hollerin' to wake the dead," Noisy grinned proudly, "and Curly Winn come boltin' out of the house and drove away in your uncle's station wagon. Almost ran over Beachie, crossing the bridge. Beachie was leggin' it over to see what was wrong."

Tommy felt a cold wash of terror go through him. This meant his uncle was still in danger, providing he was even alive. Before he could speak again, the Beachcomber turned to Noisy and snapped out a gruff order.

"Winn is stark crazy, going around stealing automobiles, hitting kids and breaking into summer cottages. Noisy, you run over to Art Matthews' house and telephone the Highway Patrol in Ilwaco."

"What'll I say, Beachie?"

"Tell them to set up roadblocks at Skinville Cut-off on Highway 101, and at the entrance to the north shore highway to Vancouver and Portland, as well as the north entrance to the river bridge to Oregon. We can't let Curly Winn skip the country in that stolen car."

"Okay, Beachie. You take it easy, Tommy."

A moment later Noisy Noyce was gone, and Tommy relaxed a little. Blackjack Gorin couldn't get off the peninsula by automobile, at least, without running into a police roadblock.

"How long—was I knocked out?" he asked hoarsely.

The Beachcomber glanced at his turnip watch. "Not more than ten-twelve minutes. Feel like talking, son?"

Tommy nodded, holding his aching head in his hands.

"There's more to this attack by Waygart's little bookkeeper than meets the eye, Tommy," the old man said. "There are one or two things I'd like to know before the police get here and start asking questions. First off, where is your uncle, Tommy? Is he in trouble of some kind?"

Tommy pulled in a deep breath and held it, pretending to be trying to clear his head. Actually, he was stalling for time. He couldn't let this old man pry any secrets out of him while his brain was still spinning like a top.

"I—don't know—where he is, sir," Tommy said truthfully. "Or whether he's in trouble."

The Beachcomber fingered his beard thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "I don't know if you know your uncle's real reason for being in Ocean Park this summer, Tommy. Tell me this—what is JC Ellison's profession? Do you know?"

Tommy Rockford's heart seemed to stop beating. The Beachcomber had dropped out of character. His speech was no longer the drawl of a beachcomber; he sounded more like an educated man.

Getting no answer from Tommy, the Beachcomber tried another angle: "I don't think you and your uncle were clamdigging last night. I believe your overnight trip had something to do with that bird-cage antenna you boys found in the driftwood in front of the Haunted Fort yesterday. Am I right?"

Knots of muscle swelled and receded in the corners of Tommy's jaw. He was still sick from the blow on the head, unable to think straight, and at a time when he needed every faculty to cope with the Beachcomber's ominous questions.

"Won't talk, eh?" the old man said, not unkindly. "That tells me what I need to know, and also that I can trust you, Tommy. You see, I am the local undercover agent for a marine insurance company."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Trudy Galt Calls CQ

Tommy's senses reeled, as much from the Beachcomber's incredible announcement as from Gorin's blow to the head. "What—company do you work for?" he asked, stalling for time.

"Puget Sound Marine Casualty. Not a big outfit, but Gorin has cost us a lot of money."

Tommy hesitated, groping for something to say. "Have you—any proof you're a detective?"

The Beachcomber grinned, rummaged in a pocket, and brought forth a glittering silver shield like Uncle JC's. Tommy turned it over in his hand wondering if it was genuine. It certainly looked all right but he just wasn't sure.

After carefully putting it away, the Beachcomber said, "I'm just a local agent, understand, not a big-shot investigator. For several weeks now I've known that Blackjack Gorin is working for Waygart Brothers as a bookkeeper. Even with his disguise, Curly Winn looked like Gorin's FBI pictures."

Tommy scowled, wondering if the Beachcomber was trying to trick him into saying something he shouldn't. If only his head would stop throbbing, so he could think straight.

"If you knew Curly Winn was Blackjack Gorin," challenged Tommy, "why didn't you let the FBI know?"

"I had orders from the company not to break the news about Gorin until we had found his illegal radio station. Once we discovered that, we could smash his gang for keeps."

Tommy thought that over, still not knowing whether he could

trust the old man. "Why didn't you let Uncle JC know you were working on the same case?"

The Beachcomber shrugged. "I had heard that Neptunian might be sending a man up here but I never thought of your uncle as an investigator until Curly Winn hit you this morning and ransacked Alderedge. Your uncle did a good job of keeping his mission a secret, Tommy. Besides, insurance companies don't swap information or cooperate with each other any better than our armed services do, Tommy. It would be a big asset for Puget Sound Marine Casualty if the word got out that we broke up Blackjack Gorin's ring."

Tommy glanced over at his HW-5400 ham transceiver, on the table by the window. He hadn't touched it since the night he had seen the old man copying CW from its speaker.

"You read radio code, don't you?" Tommy asked.

The Beachcomber chuckled. "Twice as fast as you ever will, I'll wager."

"Then why did you say you didn't know a dot from a—"

"Because," Beachcomber explained patiently, "I try to keep the fact that I'm a detective a secret just like your uncle does. And speaking of JC Ellison, I bet I know why Gorin paid this house a visit this morning. Stand by one."

The old man stepped into JC's bedroom. Tommy heard him rummaging in the clothes closet there. A moment later he came back out—carrying the miniature parabolic antenna that was to have been the receiving scanner for their secret monitoring station this summer. It was the one JC had installed in the attic above the clothes closet the night of their arrival.

"Curly Winn was ransacking Alderedge," the Beachcomber said, "when you crashed in through the front door. I think he found what he was hunting—this super-super high frequency 'dish,' up in the attic. I happen to know that Gorin's secret radio station operates on a frequency of 60,080 megahertz—and while I am no electronics technician, I would say this cute little antenna would receive a microwave signal in the 60,000-megahertz portion of the spectrum. And that, Tommy, is why I put two and two together and decided that JC Ellison, the vacationing business man, is really Neptunian's top trouble-shooter."

A slow smile touched the corners of Tommy's mouth. Impulsively, he reached out to shake the Beachcomber's hand. He had made his

decision; he had sufficient proof to convince him that the Beachcomber could be trusted.

"All right, Beachcomber. I'll admit knowing that Curly Winn is really Blackjack Gorin—and that I'm afraid he murdered Uncle JC up in the Haunted Fort at sunup this morning."

Now that he had made the plunge it was like coming out of a black cave into blessed sunshine. Up to now, he had been a seventeen-year-old boy shouldering an impossible burden all by himself. Now the words came in a flood as he unburdened himself to this detective who masqueraded as an uneducated old derelict.

Tommy explained how Noisy Noyce pried open his locked glove compartment to find the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop, and how it had led them to the strange bird-cage antenna in the driftwood. He explained how a background speaker had interrupted Gorin, when Waygart Brothers had called shore-to-ship to their bookkeeper aboard the tug *Skookum*, and how he had seen through the flimsy dyed hair and mustache disguise to the Blackjack Gorin of the prison rogues' gallery photographs.

The Beachcomber listened keenly as Tommy told of raising Uncle JC via Noisy's ham station at noon yesterday, and how JC had broken every speed law in the book getting back to Ocean Park from Aberdeen, and about their all-night radio vigil.

He wound up his recital by telling why he had hurried back to Ocean Park this morning—in the hopes that Gramps Pearson would have the keys to Fort Leadbetter, so that he could explore the underground tunnel leading to the Pillbox.

He was out of breath when he had finished. The Beachcomber, who had not opened his mouth once to interrupt with a question, got to his feet and took a turn around the floor, lost in thought. Finally he wheeled to face Tommy.

"Gramps Pearson is still the custodian of the Haunted Fort," he said. "I know he has the keys to every lock-up there."

He paused, staring down at Tommy dubiously.

"We won't notify the FBI just yet," he said, "because Noisy is telling the Highway Patrol and they will make sure Gorin doesn't escape, at least as long as he is driving Ellison's station wagon."

"I've got to get back to the Fort and at least find out if my uncle is a prisoner, or if he's been murdered."

The Beachcomber nodded. "My motorcycle has a flat tire, or I'd

run you up to the Fort," he said. "You feel up to taking me in your car?"

"Oh, sure. I've got a headache, but I'm okay. Let's go."

Halfway out to the car he remembered that Gramps was down in Ilwaco, and went on to explain to the Beachcomber about the bad news he had heard from Trudy concerning Noisy's father.

Beachcomber wagged his head somberly. "We've been expecting that drunkard to reach the end of his rope. His death would be a good riddance to the community. It's Noisy I'm sorry for. I don't know what will happen to him."

A few moments later they were headed up the paved highway north of the Wreckage turn-off, in Tommy's car. A block north of the schoolhouse, they saw Noisy Noyce emerge from a ranch-style house where he had been using the telephone to call the Ilwaco highway patrol office. Spotting them, the boy came racing out to thumb a ride.

"Pick him up," the Beachcomber said, "and we'll drop him off at Nahcotta. Even if he's heard about his stepfather being in the hospital, somebody else will have to take him there."

But Noisy, after climbing aboard, had obviously not heard about his father. He reported that he had talked personally to the sergeant on duty at the highway patrol office in Ilwaco, and that roadblocks were being set up at all motor outlets leading from the peninsula.

"Good work, old man," Tommy said, braking to a halt in front of the Ocean Park post office. "Beachcomber and I have to take a little trip, Noisy, so we're dropping you off at Nahcotta. When I get back I'll take you on down to Loomis Lake. Might go fishing with you, in fact."

To Tommy's surprise, Noisy put up no argument. He stepped out of the car and disappeared, leaving the Beachcomber and Tommy alone.

"How will we get those keys to the Fort if Gramps isn't back yet?" Tommy asked. "He probably keeps them in the post-office safe."

The Beachcomber said, "I happen to know they hang on a nail in Gramp's bedroom. I'll get Trudy to borrow 'em for us. Just wait here."

The old man went into an alley alongside the post office and up a flight of outdoor steps to the postmaster's residence on the upper floor. Peering up at the windows facing the street, Tommy didn't see

anything of Trudy or her folks.

In a matter of moments the Beachcomber was back, triumphantly waving a ring of keys.

"Trudy got 'em for me with no questions asked," Beachcomber puffed, slumping on the seat cushions and slamming the door shut. "Quite a young lady, Trudy. I like a girl with gumption enough to get a ham radio license. She was only thirteen when she got her Novice, you know."

Tommy said anxiously, "Any news about Noisy's father?"

"Trudy didn't mention the subject."

They looked around for Noisy but, failing to see him anywhere, decided they could not wait.

The Beachcomber did not break the silence again until they were passing the entrance to the Nahcotta moorage basin.

"Poor little Noisy, I wish I could adopt him. I grew up in an orphanage, so I know what he's got ahead of him."

They drove on in silence, headed up the bay shore road toward Oysterville. More out of habit than anything, Tommy switched on his ham rig and scanned the seventy-five meter phone band.

He picked up a strong local signal, which turned out to be Trudy Galt yakking with an XYL in Spokane, W7ULK. She had apparently just hooked her contact, for as the speaker came on she was saying, "...so glad you came back to my CQ. I just had to talk to someone. It just happened, Rosella. He never regained consciousness. I think you've talked to his son, KA7XNN."

Tommy said in a sick voice, "Mr. Noyce is dead then. Trudy must have just got a call on the land line from her grandfather."

The Beachcomber was apparently too engrossed in his own thoughts to have heard either the shocking news from Trudy via the radio, or Tommy's comment, which Tommy supposed was understandable, seeing as how they might be running into terrible danger up in Haunted Fort's underground passages this morning.

"I forgot to ask you," he said, "whether you know if your uncle had any undercover men working with him here on the Peninsula—men we could take along with us when we go underground at the Haunted Fort?"

Tommy's mind was on what Trudy Galt was saying on the air, but he answered, "Nobody closer than Aberdeen, sir—and they are FCC men, I think, operating a monitoring station. And I don't even

know their names, or their QTH. Unk was visiting them yesterday when I brought him back by ham radio from Noisy's station."

A silence built up between the two, each occupied with his own thoughts. Tommy turned up the gain to bring Trudy's voice up from a fade: "...it's sure been a comfort talking with you, Rosella. I'm waiting for Gramps to come out of the hospital office now, with the police. Well, 33 to you, and thanks for answering my CQ. This is K6ZNT/7 at Ilwaco, signing clear with W7ULK in Spokane."

Tommy switched off the receiver. His mind was too preoccupied with the news of the death of Noisy's stepfather to pay much attention to anything Trudy had said in her routine sign-off with the woman ham in Spokane. But something far back in the corner of his mind kept pricking at him like a needle, telling him to think. *Something Trudy said over the air was important*, said this tiny subconscious voice. *Didn't you catch it, Tommy?... Think back, think back.*

...But Tommy's thoughts were on the ordeal they had ahead of them, searching the Haunted Fort's unplumbed mysteries for some trace of his missing uncle. He was only vaguely aware of driving through Oysterville, turning west on the beach road, passing the Stackpole Harbor turn-off, and finally turning north on the abandoned dirt road that led to the Fort.

But the tiny voice of his subconscious mind refused to be ignored. Without his conscious volition, Tommy's brain seemed to twist a dial and that voice was tuned in loud and clear, demanding his attention:

The Beachcomber went upstairs to Gramps Pearson's apartment and got the keys from Trudy not more than ten minutes ago. So how is it possible for her to be outside the hospital down in Ilwaco, twenty miles away, working Spokane from her car?

A nameless tension began building up in Tommy Rockford, a slow-growing terror he tried to conceal as he went through the motions of parking his car where the first windfallen tree narrowed the road a hundred yards short of the Powerhouse.

"Beachcomber lied to me." The thought raced through his head unbidden. "Trudy wasn't there to give him Gramps' keys. Maybe he just stole 'em. But why did he have to say Trudy was there?"

The Beachcomber leaned down to remove a flashlight from the bracket on the steering column.

"It's black as a gorilla's gullet down in those tunnels under Fort Leadbetter," the old man said, climbing out of the car. "They had

electricity in there once, but the public utility line blew down and was never replaced. So we'll need our own lights."

Tommy was still carrying the camp light on his belt, from last night. He headed after the Beachcomber, his mind groping with the puzzle of why the old man had claimed to have borrowed the keys from Trudy Galt, wondering if it was important or not. Maybe he had found the Pearson apartment deserted and had gone in and helped himself and was afraid to admit having done so.

They trudged on, Tommy still unsatisfied. His hunch didn't ring true, somehow. Stealing the postmaster's keys without his permission, under the circumstances, was certainly justifiable. So why had he lied about Trudy's part in the business?

Arriving at the double doors of the Powerhouse building, the Beachcomber opened the heavy, bronze padlock and, with Tommy watching anxiously, tugged open the iron barriers to admit daylight into the gloomy, windowless building.

"From here on," the Beachcomber said, "we've got to be ready for anything. Remember that."

As he spoke, the old man reached under his checkered mackinaw and drew out a weapon Tommy had known nothing about—a stubby-barreled .38-caliber police revolver.

The Beachcomber gestured with the gun barrel for Tommy to step inside. Was it imagination, or was it an order, given at gun's point?

Tommy stepped through the doorway, conscious for the first time in his life of a twinge of claustrophobia, the dread of confined places. He had an ominous sensation that he ought to take a last look at the blue sky, as if his instincts were warning him that once he entered this mysterious place he might never see the daylight again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Phantom Footsteps

Tommy turned on his own flashlight as the Beachcomber, gun in one hand and flashlight in the other, followed him through the doorway of the Powerhouse.

The Beachcomber, having been here many times before with Gramps, knew exactly where to go. He directed the beam of his light to a long concrete ramp leading downward into eerie blackness.

"Like the highway to Hades," the old man mumbled. "All the different tunnels spread out from the foot of this ramp. Number Six, the one to the Pillbox, is on the far left."

They were heading down into the black pit of the ramp passage when they heard a thumping of feet racing through the sand outside the opened door. Spinning around, Beachcomber whipped up his revolver and cocked it—and then relaxed, as both he and Tommy recognized the scrawny, tousle-headed figure of Noisy Noyce ducking into the Powerhouse.

"Hi!" the boy called out eagerly, rushing over to join them. "I've always wanted to explore the Haunted Fort, but Gramps Pearson wouldn't take me along on his inspections. Said I was a nuisance."

The Beachcomber chuckled. "I wonder why! But how did you get here so soon, son? Who brought you? Not Curly Winn in a station wagon, by any chance?"

"I sneaked into the trunk of Tommy's car," Noisy explained, "when he was waitin' in front of the post office." The boy's eyes suddenly flooded with tears, bright as quick-silver in the flashlight glare. "I—I heard what Trudy said over the air. About my dad—passin' away this mornin'." He swallowed hard. "Don't scold me. Let me

go with you. Please. I—I won't be going nowhere at all once I—get put into a foster home."

Tommy dropped an arm around Noisy's shoulder. He said, "You go back to the car, Noisy. I—I'll tell you what, you can use my ham gear, sign my call, and—"

"No," Beachcomber cut in. "He'll be safer with us. He just *might* meet up with Curly Winn, you know."

Tommy nodded hopelessly. He heard the Beachcomber say, "Follow me, boys."

Gun clutched in a rock-steady hand, the Beachcomber led the way down the concrete ramp. Noisy Noyce, clinging to Tommy's sleeve, saw the Beachcomber turn left in the direction of Passage Six. Some twenty paces away from the bottom of the ramp they passed the opening of the first tunnel, this one being Passage Four, leading to the North Observation Post. Somewhere behind them, on the other half of the arc-shaped hub, were the first three tunnel openings, leading to the two Batteries and Magazine A.

They moved on, throwing the flashlight beams ahead of them along the curving arc of the walls, knowing the shuffle of their feet on the concrete floor was being megaphoned ahead of them to any hostile ears that might be listening at any point in this labyrinth of interconnecting concrete tubes.

Noisy was shuddering, whether from nervousness or cold Tommy did not know. He imagined the concrete floors must be like ice to Noisy's bare feet.

A few moments later they came to the dead end of the central corridor—and found the entrance to Passage Six, which led to the Pillbox, closed by an iron door with a padlock in the hasp. But the hasp was not closed.

A sign was chalked on the rusty iron door:

UNSAFE DUE TO CAVE-INS

The sign bore a date six months old and the initials W.C.P. ahead of the word CUSTODIAN. Old Pearson's initials.

"I remember Gramps Pearson telling me he found so much sand had seeped into Passage Six he was afraid it was about to collapse," the Beachcomber said, "so he sealed it. But it looks, Tommy, as if someone broke the seal on the padlock and opened it."

The significance of that statement was lost on Noisy, who knew

nothing about JC Ellison's disappearance, or of Curly Winn's true identity, or even the reason why Tommy and the old Beachcomber were exploring the fort at all.

"Let me explore it alone," Tommy volunteered. "All I'll do is go to the dead end and see if there's a trap-door entry into the Pillbox."

The Beachcomber pulled open the door the Fort's custodian—Billy Pearson, the Ocean Park postmaster—had locked and sealed against entry only six months past.

Passage Six—narrow as a grave is wide, and perhaps eight feet high—loomed arrow-straight through the darkness as they put their probing flashlight beams through the doorway. Small mounds of beach sand formed undulating hummocks along the concrete floor, proof that cracks had developed in walls or ceiling, admitting the spillage.

"Look!" Tommy cried, flashing his beam of light on the first pile of damp sand on the floor ahead. "Fresh footprints—scads of 'em! And tire tracks! Gorin's motorcycle—"

"Maybe fresh, maybe not," the Beachcomber said. "Could have been left six months ago by Gramps and his party. He used to lead guided tours through Haunted Fort before he got tied down with the postmaster job."

They pushed on over the first mound of sand, probing the black pools of shadow beyond it with their flashlight beams, which ranged ahead of them like the horns of a snail.

"It's only another fifty feet or so," murmured Tommy, "and we'll be under the Pillbox floor where the tunnel ends."

A little cascade of loose sand sifted down through a fissure in the moist concrete ceiling, striking Tommy in the neck. He was reminded that this whole passageway could collapse any instant and their bones would never be found.

Noisy let out a little cry as an obscenely fat sewer rat scuttled past them from somewhere up ahead, squeaking. There was a musky, sewer-like odor here in Passage Six, which they hadn't noticed in the fresher air of the inner hub.

And then their lights hit dead end up ahead—a sheer concrete bulkhead. The passageway widened into an underground room, there at the dead end—an octagonal room, which Tommy was quick to recognize as a sort of basement built under the Pillbox where his uncle had been at dawn.

Numb with excitement, Tommy shook off Noisy's clinging hand

on his sleeve and, racing past the Beachcomber, was the first to reach the octagonal basement with its high iron ceiling.

He swung his flashlight beam around, puzzled by what he saw, a massive iron windlass drum, with rusty wire cable leading up into the overhead shadows to an arrangement of wheels and gears. There was also an iron cupboard, possibly a foot in depth, painted battleship gray with a stenciled sign on it: PAINT LOCKER—KEEP FIRE AWAY—NO SMOKING.

Tommy's exploring flashlight beam picked up no sign of a human form—his uncle or anyone else. But he did make a discovery that told him, at least partially, what had happened in the Pillbox overhead at sunrise this morning.

A steel ladder led from the floor to the ceiling—an iron-girdered ceiling which, Tommy knew, was also the floor of the Pillbox.

The ladder, at first glance, led to the array of gears and wheels, which were connected by the steel cable to the windlass drum on the floor. But what, Tommy wondered, would happen if one turned the massive crank of that windlass? What would the wheels and gears and shafts up there under the Pillbox floor be doing when the cable moved?

Beachcomber and Noisy arrived at the tunnel exit just as Tommy Rockford seized the big iron crank and hurled his weight upon it. The windlass began turning on well-oiled bearings. Gears meshed, overhead; cogged wheels began spinning.

The Beachcomber turned his flashlight on the machinery at the top of the ladder. As Tommy continued to crank the windlass drum, jointed metal arms took on animation—and, before their eyes, a yard-square iron panel in the ceiling slid to one side on noiseless, greased runners.

"A trap door!" Tommy Rockford yelled. "The one Gorin brought my uncle through this morning—"

Tense with excitement, Tommy scuttled up the iron rungs of the ladder until his head and shoulders were projecting through the trap in the Pillbox floor.

"Unk! Uncle JC! Can you hear me?"

Tommy's shout trailed off into a whisper. All he heard was the roar of the surf and the cry of seagulls. The Pillbox was still as empty as it had been this morning at dawn. From where he stood on the ladder, he could see the big iron bar resting in its sockets, closing the Pillbox door from within. The observation window slot was a blinding

bar of sunshine; there Uncle JC had been standing when the trapdoor had slid noiselessly open and Blackjack Gorin had ordered him to get his arms up and not turn around.

Tommy turned to stare down at the Beachcomber and Noisy. He shook his head in answer to the old man's unvoiced question; no sign of JC Ellison.

Where, then, had he gone?

As if answering that question, the Beachcomber said, "It means exploring every inch of Haunted Fort, boys."

Even as Tommy came back down the ladder, the Beachcomber switched off his flashlight and, springing forward to the windlass drum, started uncranking the trap-door mechanism overhead.

While Tommy and young Noisy stared, puzzled at the urgency in the Beachcomber's maneuver, the overhead slot of sunlight narrowed to a crack and then was extinguished—metal running on greased metal in total silence. They were in total darkness.

"Don't switch on your light, Tommy!" came the Beachcomber's taut whisper. "I think I heard footsteps. Sounds travel a long way underground. I think somebody's coming down the ramp from the Powerhouse. No telling who."

Tommy groped his way over to where Noisy had taken refuge against the Beachcomber's back.

"We could open the trap door and escape up the ladder," he started to suggest, but broke off at a whispered order from the old man.

Noisy Noyce said in a whimpering monotone, "I hear it, I hear it! It's the ghosts that haunt this fort, that's who it is—ghosts coming to get *us*."

Tommy reached for and found Noisy in the pitch blackness, clamping a hand over the boy's mouth, knowing his superstitious fear could start him screaming in hysteria. The boy probably believed the stories he'd heard spun about Haunted Fort, about its being the abode of the spirits of sailors who had once manned the ghost ships of the Peninsula.

To Tommy's ears now came the unmistakable sound of heavy shoe soles clumping along a concrete floor, and coming nearer with every step. The Haunted Fort's subterranean passages were like megaphones, amplifying the echoes, distorting the acoustics.

A faint glimmer of light came from far down the throat of Passage Six. Tommy remembered that they had left the door yawning open,

so whoever that was coming would not see Billy Pearson's sign condemning that tunnel as unsafe to enter.

The footsteps abruptly ceased, but the wagging beam of an electric lantern's rays became brighter. That meant whoever was coming was walking over the sand heaps now, making no sound.

"I'm hoping it'll be your uncle," the Beachcomber whispered close to Tommy's ear. "Stand back, though, if it should be necessary for me to shoot. Slugs would ricochet a dozen times in this dungeon."

In frozen tableau, the two boys stood on either side of the Beachcomber. There was a comfort in seeing the blued-steel shine of the old man's .38 pistol barrel glinting in the reflected light of the oncoming lantern. The Beachcomber's fist was as steady as a statue's.

Another dozen steps and their visitor would be entering the Pillbox basement chamber. It could be JC Ellison. Or it could be a casual sightseer who had seen the Powerhouse door open and decided to go sightseeing underground. Or it could be—

The blinding white eye of the lantern came into view in the mouth of the exit tunnel. It was not until the Beachcomber snapped on his own flashlight and shot its beam on the face of the man that they knew who it was.

Blackjack Gorin stood there, still wearing the hooded football varsity parka he had taken from JC Ellison.

The Beachcomber stepped forward, halting at arm's length from Blackjack Gorin.

"Take over, Blackjack," the old man said, handing Gorin the gun. "I'm no good at this kind of faking."

The terrible truth dawned in Tommy's brain even as he heard Gorin say, "Good work, Spark-Gap. I'm glad you brought both of 'em."

Noisy Noyce, understanding nothing, called out, "Curly Winn, what on earth made you call Beachie 'Spark-Gap'?"

The Beachcomber turned to stare at the two boys.

"You'll find out sooner or later, so I'll tell you now, boys," the old man said sadly. "You know me as the Beachcomber—but I'm really Spark-Gap Gallagher, the wireless operator of the *Vamoose*. And against my will, I've been forced to—to lead you both to your deaths, I guess."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Spark-Gap's Ghost Ship

Tommy's brain was slow in grasping what his eyes and ears told him. He heard the Beachcomber say, "We've got nothing to worry about, Blackjack. The boy assures me his uncle had no one working on the case nearer than Aberdeen."

Tommy heard himself blurt out, "Then you—you tricked me with a law badge that wasn't yours."

The Beachcomber shrugged. "I didn't like lying to you, Tommy. I guess I'm not cut out to deal with—with criminals of Mr. Gorin's stature. But I needed money to carry on my experiments, and he paid me well in return for what I had to offer him. The use of my long-range microwave radio."

Tommy had a one-track mind just now. "That detective's badge was my uncle's! You killed him and used his badge to deceive me. You're not a detective at all!"

Gorin snapped, "Shut up, punk! I'll do the talking here." He turned to the Beachcomber. "We'll set up the antenna once more and put an emergency message on the air, telling the syndicate to maintain radio silence until they hear from me at a new location."

All the vitality seemed to fade from the Beachcomber's eyes.

"New location? But the secret of the *Vamoose* is still safe. You will never be discovered."

Gorin cut the Beachcomber off with an oath. "I aim to force Ellison to tell me if the cops have caught on to our operating frequency. If they have, I'll need you to whip up new gear, Spark-Gap."

Tommy's heart leaped. Gorin's reference to JC reassured him that his uncle was still alive, even if a prisoner.

"Now I know why you said Trudy Galt loaned you those keys, when she wasn't even home!" Tommy burst out. "They were your keys—you had 'em in your pocket all the time."

Ignoring Tommy's outburst, the Beachcomber said to Gorin, "The boys didn't discover our antenna yesterday by accident. They listened in on an FCC direction finder to our transmissions. Our 60,080-megahertz frequency has been discovered, Blackjack."

Gorin's shoulders lifted and fell in resignation to bad news.

"That means the *Vamoose* has outlived its usefulness to me, then. I wonder if the government has broken our code yet?"

The Beachcomber said heavily, "We knew they were getting too close for comfort when we caught Ellison. What hurts, Blackjack, is having a kid break the case, not FCC."

Tommy took a step forward, heedless of Beachcomber's gun.

"You waylaid my uncle in the Pillbox and you were hiding in Unk's station wagon when Gorin drove you back to Ocean Park. What have you done with him? Where is he?"

Gorin answered for the Beachcomber: "We're taking you to him, sonny. And you, Noisy, are coming along with us."

Noisy was just beginning to be aware of the fact that he and Tommy were prisoners, and facing death. What seemed to hurt him worst of all was that his idol, the Beachcomber, had exposed himself as a traitor.

"Let's go," Blackjack Gorin said, and crossed over to the door of the paint locker on the west wall of the basement room.

Puzzled, Tommy saw Gorin open the cupboard, exposing the steel shelves he had already inspected, where inflammables had been stored in the days when the Fort was activated.

Tommy forgot his despair in his astonishment at what happened next. Gorin reached into the shallow cupboard and pulled at the edge of one of the steel shelves. Instantly the entire cupboard swung outward on invisible pivots, to reveal a wood-lined room dug out of the sand hill behind the cupboard, with an exit tunnel sloping downward toward the ocean.

Parked just inside the opening was the Beachcomber's motorcycle!

"A false door—you knew it was there all the time, didn't you?" Tommy cried accusingly. "This is where you hid your motorcycle last night—those tire tracks on the sand were yours."

The Beachcomber smiled bleakly. "It's where I've kept my motor-

cycle every time I've come up here for many years, Tommy," he said. "I've spent more time in my underground laboratory than I have at The Wreckage. And this tunnel we're going into—I dug every foot of it myself, and shored it up with timbers I dragged into the Haunted Fort from the beach."

The boys headed into the secret passage behind the paint locker at a snarled command from Gorin, who stood aside with his gun until they and the Beachcomber had entered. Then he carefully closed the door behind them and the Beachcomber led the way with the lantern. Noisy, a small whimpering sound in his throat, gripped Tommy's hand as they set out.

Cobwebs brushed their faces. The tunnel floor was wet and irregular underfoot. Unlike the concrete-lined passages of the Haunted Fort behind them, this tunnel was low-ceilinged and narrow, and floored only with the beach sand through which it had been excavated.

All four of them had to crouch low in places where sand had sifted in, partially blocking the tunnel.

"Where are we goin'?" Noisy wanted to know, shuddering at the clammy coldness of this subterranean passage.

"We're heading for the secret radio station," the Beachcomber said. "I know you boys, being interested in electronics, will enjoy seeing my underground laboratory. I don't want to sound boastful, but my experiments in microwave radiotelegraphy and telephony are fifty years ahead of the rest of the world's scientists."

Tommy's heart was going like a triphammer against his ribs. There was barely width enough in the Beachcomber's fantastic tunnel under the beach for him and Noisy Noyce to walk side by side. Tommy, being the tallest of the quartet, several times bumped his head on low ceiling beams.

"You say you dug this tunnel?" he asked the Beachcomber, his curiosity shoving his terror to one side. "But why?"

In the glare of the bobbing flashlight, the Beachcomber's whiskered face looked like a disembodied skull floating in the darkness in mid-air.

"For commercial reasons," the old man admitted. "It takes money to equip a laboratory such as mine. My opportunity came in Prohibition days when Willapa Bay was a rum-runner's paradise. You'll see my radio lab, up ahead of us. Back in the nineteen twenties it stored as much as a million dollars' worth of bootleg at a time. The

booze smugglers paid me well for the use of an underground warehouse the law could not possibly find.”

Up ahead, the lantern beam revealed that the Beachcomber’s tunnel was coming to an end against a wall that was, incredibly, built of riveted iron plates, not driftlogs salvaged from the beach over their heads. There was a door with a circular glass window in it, and heavy waterproof gaskets and massive bronze hinges and lock fastenings.

Judging from the distance they had come, Tommy decided the Beachcomber’s tunnel led under the driftwood tangle on the beach. The iron door in the iron wall ahead of them, then, was probably directly under the spot where he and Noisy had discovered the bird-cage antenna amid the driftwood.

The tunnel widened out ten feet short of the iron wall to form a wood-lined chamber some ten feet square and ten feet from sand floor to heavy-beamed ceiling.

“It took some engineering, I can tell you, to get those beams in place,” the Beachcomber said, as the four of them came to a halt. “We’re twenty-odd feet under the surface here, with tons of sand and driftlogs over us. I had to use house jacks to inch those timbers into place, and block and tackle gear.”

Tommy was staring at the iron wall before them, and especially at the round window in the iron door which the Beachcomber at this moment was unlocking.

“It looks like the hull of a ship,” Tommy said in awestruck tones “That window could be a porthole—”

“It’s not a hull, but you’re close,” Gorin said. “It’s the forward deck cabin of a ghost ship, boys. The deck is beneath us. The whole ship is buried with sand, except this entryway into the deck house.”

Tommy gasped a single word: *Vamoose!*

As if he had tuned in telepathically with Tommy’s mind, the Beachcomber said, “It’s an amazing story, boys. I lived in this deckhouse the first winter, before the old *Vamoose* settled to her scuppers in the sand. Spark-Gap Gallagher, the peninsula folks called me, and tapped their foreheads when they saw me out clamdigging, figuring the ordeal I suffered in my wireless room had driven me loony.”

Tommy thought, “The TV shows would call him a ‘mad genius.’ Spark-Gap isn’t crazy, but he’s just over the border line of insanity.”

The Beachcomber went on in an odd, crooning voice, chanting

the words: "By the second winter the sand and drift had buried the *Vamoose* from taffrail to knightheads. I built a companionway to this cabin here, disguising the entrance with driftwood. I had my life savings in my sea chest, and I wanted to conduct some radio experiments in short-wave propagation. Short-wave radio was unheard of in those days.

"So I pretended to disappear—commit suicide in the surf. Two years later, with a beard, I came back to the Peninsula. No one knew me. No one would know I had a wireless background. No one was interested in the *Vamoose* by that time. She had quit settling by then. So I knew her keel had hit bedrock, where she sits today.

"The next winter I built The Wreckage in Ocean Park, and became the village character, the old Beachcomber. Nobody paid attention if I was away for days at a time, in my ghost ship lab. Later on I decided to build a tunnel over from the Fort, because there's times in winter when even a motorcycle can't get up the beach because of high water, and there was a road leading to the Fort that was seldom used."

As if he had grown weary of speechmaking, the Beachcomber suddenly opened the door of the ghost ship and snapped a switch. Dazzling electric lights momentarily blinded them, and then Tommy found himself stepping over the foot-high coaming into the *Vamoose's* deckhouse, as eagerly as an Alice entering the portals of Wonderland.

And it *was* a wonderland. Fluorescent lights, powered by a generating plant somewhere in the hull of the ghost ship, illuminated a scene like a Hollywood movie set for a pseudoscience thriller. There was little to suggest the nautical in this ship's cabin, other than the teakwood ceiling beams and the portholes, packed with sand outside, along the far bulkhead. The Beachcomber had converted the deckhouse of the sunken schooner into a scientific laboratory that would have done justice to Cal Tech or MIT.

Everywhere Tommy looked he saw rack-mounted panels covered with meters and dials, toggle switches and pilot light jewels, outlandish-looking spiral coils of gleaming copper and cadmium, giant electronic tubes, some of them as large as fire hydrants, the nature of which Tommy had not the faintest inkling and which he knew had probably been fabricated by the Beachcomber himself, in this underground ghost ship laboratory.

It was too overwhelming to grasp. Even Noisy, with his limited knowledge of radio, sensed that he was in the presence of a scientist

who had turned his genius to unholy uses.

And then, out of the bewildering hodgepodge of electronic gear, which ranged the four sides of the room to leave space for metal-working lathes, drill presses, saws and milling machinery in the center of the deck area, Noisy Noyce saw something he could link with the reality he had left behind at the paint locker door in the Haunted Fort.

"Tommy—*look!*" the boy cried, pointing to something on the nearest workbench. "The vanishing antenna we were looking for in the driftwood yesterday!"

It was true. There was the gold-plated bird cage with the miniature TV Yagi antenna inside it, with a neat coil of black hoselike waveguide attached to it.

The Beachcomber's face glowed with pleasure as he walked over to lay a hand on the "bird cage."

"This radiating device for microwaves," the old man said "is something I developed myself, right here in my *Vamoose* lab. There is nothing like it in the outside scientific world, nothing remotely like it. Using only low power—a hundred watts or so—I can beam a microwave signal a thousand miles or more on 60,080 megahertz, around the curve of the earth, regardless of ionospheric conditions. If I had a hundred kilowatts of power, I could beam a microwave signal from this antenna of mine to the remotest part of our galaxy. It's the answer to interplanetary communication!"

It was a demented man talking nonsense now, Tommy told himself. Or was it? This was, he knew, the secret radio station that Blackjack Gorin used to communicate with his outlaw syndicate, from Mexico to Alaska. FCC investigators had already cracked the secret of Gorin's wavelength and had built the Snooper-Loop to tune to its frequency. Tommy recalled how he had jeered at his uncle for saying that Gorin's radio station could cover a thousand miles at a wavelength that was supposed to be limited to a few miles.

"All this is fascinating," Tommy said coldly, "but all I'm interested in is seeing if my uncle is okay. You're holding him prisoner here in the *Vamoose*, aren't you?"

The Beachcomber ignored the question. He was fingering the bird-cage antenna as he pointed to a length of waveguide tubing which led down through a lead-in fitting in the ceiling.

"Yesterday when you boys tipped off Mr. Gorin that you'd stumbled across our antenna," the old man said, "he hurried over

to the beach on his motorcycle and disconnected it. We have a junction box a few inches under the sand where we can connect the antenna to the cable that leads down here to the lab through a conduit pipe. Just in case we need to hide it—and it's never happened before."

Tommy turned impatiently to Blackjack Gorin, who had shut the exit door behind them.

"Where's my uncle?" he demanded again.

Gorin glanced over at the Beachcomber, who said, "Yes, it was Tommy who was listening to whatever Ellison broadcast over that hand-held radio."

The old man turned back to Tommy and said, "There are only three compartments in the *Vamoose* that are livable; the rest are either caved in or filled with sand. This lab is the largest. Then I built a generating plant and airconditioning system in a compartment of the hold, below us. You see how fresh the air is, even though we're a good fifteen or twenty feet underground? And then there's my old wireless room. That's where your precious uncle is, Tommy."

The boys moved like sleepwalkers expecting any moment to awake from a nightmare, as the Beachcomber led the way to the north bulkhead of the laboratory compartment.

The Beachcomber inserted a key in a shiny brass lock, twisted the brass knob, and pulled the door open to reveal a small, dimly-lighted room. He stood aside as Tommy came forward, stepping over the coaming to get inside, with Noisy close at his heels.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Uncle JC's Story

It took Tommy a moment to locate his uncle, so feeble was the light of the single bulb in the wireless room ceiling.

Then he saw JC Ellison, down on his knees facing the base of a thick steel stanchion supporting the deck overhead. His arms were hugging that metal post, shackled by his own handcuffs. Tommy leaped forward and dropped beside his uncle, reaching out to touch the ugly raw welt on JC's scalp, causing him to wince.

Gorin spoke waspishly from the door behind them, "Forget what I said about acid-throwing this morning, Ellison. Your nephew told Spark-Gap about your finding our microwave frequency. It ought to make you feel good, knowing I've got to pull stakes out of Washington for keeps."

The heavy door closed noiselessly on its rubber gaskets as Gorin withdrew into the Beachcomber's adjoining laboratory.

"What did he mean, Unk?" Tommy asked in alarm. "About acid throwing?"

JC said hoarsely, "They were going to try to torture me into telling whether we were wise to their microwave frequency. Now that the secret's out, Gorin has to move his pirate radio setup somewhere else—Mexico, he says."

Tommy said, "Tell us what happened, Unk? I heard a shot over the radio, just at sunrise, and then nothing."

JC said, "They got the drop on me through that trapdoor in the Pillbox floor that I didn't know about. I was busy looking out the window slot, of course, thinking I heard them creeping up outside. I didn't know who hit me from behind, but I know they spotted the

hand-held and put a bullet in it.”

“And when you woke up, you were down here—in this ghost ship under the driftwood?”

“Yes. With a goose egg on my head, and my own handcuffs on my wrists. Gorin even found my handcuff keys on a string around my neck, and tossed them on the lab bench out there. I’d give every cent I have in the world to have someone bring me those keys—so I could get free of this cursed iron post.”

Tommy got up and walked over to the locked door. Peering through the six-inch glass porthole into the laboratory room, he could see Gorin and the Beachcomber engaged in what appeared to be an angry argument of some kind, over by the exit door. No sound of their voices penetrated the bulkhead.

Nearer at hand, at the end of a bench cluttered with test equipment and electronic tools, Tommy saw the broken string attached to the tiny key which had the power of opening JC’s wrist fetters.

They might as well have been on the moon.

Turning back to his uncle, Tommy waited for JC to resume.

“They were worried about who might have been monitoring the two-meter radio signals,” JC said. “The Beachcomber knew the approximate range of the instrument, of course. They yakked with me for half an hour or so, and then decided to do some investigating in Alderedge. They didn’t return until just now—with you kids.”

Tommy filled in for his uncle: “They swiped your station wagon, Gorin wearing your parka to disguise him, and the Beachcomber must have been hiding in the rear. That’s why we saw him hard at work on his flower beds while Gorin was inside Alderedge, locating your microwave dish.” He went on to explain his own disaster in the front room at Alderedge, and how the Beachcomber, summoned by Noisy, had pretended to be a detective working on the same case as JC Ellison, in order to gain Tommy’s confidence.

Noisy spoke for the first time: “We’re all going to die, aren’t we? Curly Winn and Beachie are bad men, and they’re going to kill us.”

Tommy saw his uncle’s eyes go moist. “How old are you, Noisy?” he asked irrelevantly.

“Twelve goin’ on thirteen. I’m in seventh grade and I got me a Novice ticket. I—I’m an orphan, now. My—Dad died—this mornin’. So I don’t much care...what happens to me here.”

It was brave talk, kid talk, delivered in the shaky falsetto of a child whistling in the dark to keep his courage up. But it made JC's throat muscles twitch, as if he found talking difficult.

"Twelve, going on thirteen," the detective said huskily. "A golden year in a boy's life." He glanced up at Tommy. "That's how old my little tike Wally would have been, you know, if he hadn't been killed by that hit-and-run driver."

"Wally?" echoed Noisy Noyce. "Say, that's my handle, too, my real handle that is. Wallace Alexander, I was christened, after my real father. I don't know why"—his eyes sparkled impishly—"they got to callin' a quiet-type kid like me by the name of 'Noisy.' Because my stepdad's name was Noyce, I guess."

"Wally," JC repeated musingly, as if the name had a sweet taste, to be savored on the tongue. "I can't get over your being named Wally, like my own son."

Tommy said after a pause, "What'll they do to us?"

JC shrugged. "I think Gorin intends to blow up this ghost ship of the Beachcomber's, anyway. He knows the jig is up so far as his Willapa Bay radio operation is concerned."

"Especially," Tommy confessed, "since I blabbed everything I promised to keep secret, Unk, about the Super-Duper Snooper-Loop and all. But I was desperate, and Beachcomber was so darned convincing about being a detective, and I had to make a decision on my own. . . . But I can't convince myself that the old duffer is a villainous person."

JC shook his head.

"The Beachcomber is a fanatic, Tommy. He's a dedicated scientist. He needed money for his experiments. Life savings got him started. Rental of storage space to bootleggers in the nineteen twenties kept him going. And then he became a dupe of Blackjack Gorin's, leasing his microwave radio equipment for what he might not have known, at first, was a criminal enterprise. My theory is that his sanity cracked when he went through the ordeal of the storm that killed all his shipmates aboard the *Vamoose*. He's to be pitied, not condemned."

Tommy said adamantly, "But he brought Noisy and me here to die in this trap, when he could have warned us away."

"True enough," Uncle JC agreed, "but remember that Gorin forced the old man to obey orders on the threat of something which was infinitely worse than death itself to the Beachcomber—refusal to

keep on financing his scientific experiments.”

Tommy wasn't sure he completely understood, but it was too late now to gain anything by berating a man with a warped genius.

“He claims to be fifty years ahead of his time when it comes to long-range microwave communication,” Tommy said, “and I think from what I've seen that he's right.”

There was a long silence. Tommy looked curiously around the wireless room, which was their prison. It was pantry-sized, hardly more than ten feet square, with steel-paneled walls, ceiling and deck. A massive black iron safe with the name VAMOOSE on the door dominated the corner nearest the door. Along the back wall was a bench where a dusty tarp of sailcloth covered odds and ends of junk.

As a prison, this compartment was as escape-proof as a solitary confinement cell in the dungeon of a penitentiary, he saw.

“So this was Spark-Gap Gallagher's old radio shack,” Tommy mused, “in the era of spark gap transmitters. That post you're handcuffed to, Unk, must be the very stanchion he lashed himself to during the big storm that wrecked the *Vamoose*.”

A sniffing noise directed their attention to Noisy, who was leaning against the big safe, face buried in his hands.

“I—I ain't bawling because I'm ascairt,” he said, lifting his head defiantly. “It's—because I heard what K6ZNT said about my step-father dyin' this morning.”

“Try not to think about it,” Tommy said huskily.

“Oh, I ain't grievin' for him,” Noisy said candidly. “He used to beat me and Mom, and everything. But he—he was all I had in the world, except Beachie, and now I know he's a bad man. So that leaves me without anybody at all, and it's an empty feeling. You two wouldn't understand.”

JC hitched himself around the iron pillar until he could get a direct view of Noisy. Lifting his manacled hands, the detective beckoned for the boy to come to him.

“Come over here, Wally,” JC said in the gentlest of voices.

Noisy blinked, then grinned at the unaccustomed use of his baptismal name. Slowly at first, and then with an impulsive dart, he came over to lean close against the man's shoulder.

“If my little boy hadn't been killed in an accident, Wally,” JC Ellison said, “he'd have been just about your size, I imagine. Just as spunky, and as mischievous as I understand you are.”

Noisy Noyce wiped a frayed sleeve across his eyes.

"It's all my fault we're in this mess, waitin' to be starved to death in a buried ghost ship!" he burst out. "If I hadn't pried open the glove compartment of Tommy's car and found that direction finder, we wouldn't have located that bird-cage antenna in the driftwood. If I hadn't told Tommy about the *Skookum* being over at Stackpole Harbor, he wouldn't have run into Curly Winn and got us in all this trouble."

JC got one of Noisy's hands between his own. "You're a rugged individualist, Wally, and in this day and age it's refreshing to find a boy who doesn't want to conform and be like everybody else is."

Something was working on JC's mind, and Tommy suddenly felt like an outsider who was eavesdropping on something too precious, too personal for JC and Noisy to share with him.

"Boys," JC Ellison said, including Tommy in what he had to say, "I'm going to be brutally frank with you, just as if you were my age, because I know you've got the courage it takes to face bad news like men."

They waited for him to go on. Very faintly to their ears, from the other side of the bulkhead, they could hear the sound of voices raised in angry bickering.

"That's Gorin and the Beachcomber going 'round and 'round about whether to destroy the *Vamoose* or not," JC said. "It ties in with what I heard them arguing about this morning, after they dragged me here from the Pillbox to hold as a hostage. Gorin said if it turned out that their microwave radio operation had been discovered, he was going to blow up this ghost ship. That's when the old Beachcomber defied him and said it would be over his dead body."

They were silent a minute, listening, but heard only the remote boom of the surf reaching them through ventilating shafts elsewhere in the ghost ship.

"Anyway, whether the *Vamoose* is destroyed or not, the three of us will be destroyed," JC went on. "Even you boys—since in the final analysis, you two did more to wreck Gorin's plans than I did, that's for certain."

JC turned now to rub the line of his stubbled jaw against Noisy's tousled head. Noisy, who had not known a parent's affection since he could remember, cuddled into the angle of JC's neck and shoulder as an infant might.

"But let's play a game in our minds, just for kicks," JC went on. "Suppose some miracle happened and we did get out of the *Vamoose* alive. Do you know what I'd like more than anything else in the world, sonny?"

Noisy's spaniel-sad eyes lifted to regard JC worshipfully.

"What?"

"I'd like to legally adopt you as my son. I could, I'm sure, now that your stepfather has passed on. I'm aiming to get married in Seattle in a few months from now. I know your new mother would love you, and you'd love her."

"Gosh—I think that would be wonderful!" Noisy said huskily. "That would make Tommy my cousin, wouldn't it? And I could call you Dad, and there'd be a mom—" Suddenly the boy's face went as bleak and dead as a cold candle wick. "But you won't—ever see her again, will you? We're just playing make-believe."

After a long silence, Tommy broke the spell with a change of subject: "How did Gorin and the Beachcomber ever join up, Unk?"

JC said, "They told me about it, this morning. When Gorin escaped from prison and decided to set up his safe-cracking syndicate, he needed radio to tie his operations together. Some underworld character who had been a bootlegger in Prohibition times told him to look up Spark-Gap Gallagher, up in Ocean Park, Washington, who had a secret radio lab in a ghost ship."

Tommy waited for his uncle to go on.

"So Gorin looked up the Beachcomber," JC went on. "The Beachcomber needed money to finance his microwave experiments, and Gorin took one look at the laboratory in there and knew he had found a radio station that could operate indefinitely without discovery. So they went into partnership, with Gorin hiring out as a bookkeeper for Waygart Brothers to account for his being in the community, and directing the operations of his pirate ring on the side, by radio. I don't believe the Beachcomber actually realized that he was aiding and abetting a crime syndicate until it was too late to back out. He had to play along to stay alive—but I predict his luck has run out today, and that he'll die along with us."

Tommy shuddered. "I wonder who was operating this *Vamoose* station yesterday morning when we intercepted their signals? We know the Beachcomber was in Ocean Park, getting ready for the ham club party at The Wreckage, and Gorin was on board the *Skookum*. If

he hadn't left his ship-to-shore monitor on in the background, I wouldn't have had any clues to run down."

JC said, "The Beachcomber operates the *Vamoose* station by a transistorized remote-control microwave link from The Wreckage—only twelve miles line-of-sight from his hidden antenna to the bird cage in the driftwood."

"But," Tommy protested, "he doesn't even have an ac power line running to The Wreckage."

JC grinned wryly. "So he claims. Maybe his transistorized remote-control apparatus is battery-powered, I don't know. I'm only telling you what he himself told me, this morning—that the *Vamoose* transmitter is activated by remote control from Ocean Park, whenever he isn't here personally."

Tommy's eyes were on the handle of the bulkhead door linking the wireless room with Spark-Gap's laboratory, when he saw it start to turn.

"Company coming," he said. "Now we'll find out what's going to happen to the three of us, maybe."

Whatever Gorin would tell them, Tommy knew the answer would add up to the same thing: death.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Thirty-one Minutes to Live

The door swung back to reveal Blackjack Gorin, his face contorted with anger about something or other. He held the Beachcomber's .38 police revolver in his right hand; an alligator-leather briefcase was hugged under his left arm.

"Stand back from the door—belly up to the wall, you two kids!" Gorin ordered Tommy and Noisy, gesturing with the cocked gun. "Keep your arms up, palms to the wall. Move!"

As the two boys moved over to the rivet-studded deckhouse wall, the Beachcomber followed Gorin into the wireless room. His skull-gaunt face was bone-white with rage and his watery eyes blazed with a maniacal light.

"It's completely unthinkable, destroying my equipment!" the old man choked out. "What would it accomplish, wrecking my experimental lash-ups, rubbing out a lifetime's work, all my records, everything, in a puff of smoke! I won't allow it."

Blackjack Gorin placed the empty briefcase on top of the safe and moved around to where he could keep an eye on the three prisoners as well as old Spark-Gap.

"You're in no position to allow anything, Sparkie," the convict sneered. "Now open that vault. I want to get those keys I left with you for safekeeping—and that red box you stored for me. Then I'm pulling out of here—for keeps."

The Beachcomber shook his head adamantly.

"You've got your seaplane waiting for you in the slough on the island," the old man said in a trembling falsetto. "You can make your getaway. But there is no reason to destroy the *Vamoose*. It's bad enough that you find yourself forced to destroy Ellison and the boys."

Blackjack Gorin sucked in a deep breath, curbing his impatience with a visible effort. He reached under the high school football parka he was still wearing and fished a cigar from a pocket of his shirt. Sticking it between his teeth, Gorin bit out,

"My whole operation depends on communications, Spark-Gap, and you know it. I can't gamble on somebody else discovering this ghost ship of yours. If a brat like Tommy Rockford could monitor you, who's to say an FCC snooper might not find you? No. When I go, I leave nothing behind me to help the law."

Beachcomber quivered with rage. Tommy, witnessing their dramatic showdown from his position with his cheek against the rusty iron bulkhead of the wireless room, found himself feeling an acute pity for the old man.

"Open the safe, Spark-Gap," Gorin said in measured tones. "If you don't, I will, but I'm trying to save time. For all I know, Ellison may have an army of FBI men moving in on us."

Beachcomber shook his head. "No. You don't know the combination. You can kill me, but I won't open that vault. I know what that key ring means to you. You couldn't run your dirty business without it, you said so yourself."

Gorin glanced over at JC Ellison, kneeling helplessly at the base of the iron pillar. Then, without warning, Blackjack Gorin turned on the Beachcomber, lifting his gun like a club. Tommy squeezed his eyes shut in horror as the gun came down in a blurred arc toward the old man's chin. He heard gun-metal thud on bone, and the old man's gusty exhalation as he slumped to the deck, as inert as a coat dropped from a hook.

When Tommy opened his eyes again it was to see Gorin transferring the Beachcomber's keys to his own pocket. The Beachcomber lay at Gorin's feet, as still as a corpse. A crimson stain was spreading under the old man's beard, where Gorin's gun had clipped the vital nerve on the point of the jaw. Tommy could scarcely see him breathe.

"You'll enjoy what I'm going to do now, Ellison," Gorin said, lifting something that resembled a doctor's stethoscope out of the briefcase. "This is the gadget that made me the King of the Safecrackers. You'll get to see a demonstration."

JC and the two boys stared fascinated as the redheaded gangster fitted the plugs of the stethoscope in his ears, knelt before the safe, and placed the bell of the instrument near the combination dial, as

a physician would have placed it over the heart of a patient he was examining.

"This listening gadget has a transistorized amplifier that lets me hear how a lock is working," Gorin went on, as his supersensitive fingertips began rotating the dial. "The newspapers used to say Blackjack Gorin had X-ray eyes, remember? They'd have been closer to the truth if they'd said I had radar ears. There isn't a combination lock made that I can't open—by sense of touch and this listening gadget I made when I was an apprentice locksmith. It was a bulky thing in those days, but miniature ICs and transistors have reduced the thing to pocket size."

Almost before he finished talking, Blackjack Gorin pulled the foot-thick laminated steel door of the safe wide open.

The safe's steel shelves were mostly filled with books—obviously the Beachcomber's scientific notebooks, stored in this fireproof vault to protect the fruits of his life's work against accidental loss. One compartment of the safe held a red-painted box with a padlocked lid, marked GORIN.

Opening a metal drawer, Blackjack Gorin drew out two small objects of blue-black kangaroo leather. One, Tommy and his uncle recognized, was a key case plump with keys. The other was a pocket-sized book like a diary.

Gorin riffled the pages of the book with a thumb, lifting his head to grin at JC Ellison.

"The government boys and you insurance detectives would pay me a million in cold cash for a look at this book, Ellison," the convict gloated. "It's got the radio code my gang uses—a dozen different codes, because we switch every few weeks on schedule. And you'd pay me another million to lay your hands on this ring of keys and what it represents."

Gorin got to his feet. He dropped the code book into his briefcase and snapped it shut. Placing the briefcase back on top of the safe, he again lowered himself to a squat before the open vault. Unsnapping the key case, he sorted through the score of keys it contained until he found one which opened the padlock on the mysterious red box he had stored in the Beachcomber's safe.

Twisting around to face JC Ellison, Gorin dangled the key case tantalizingly before the detective, knowing he was inflicting an exquisite mental torture on his archenemy.

"Yessir, like Spark-Gap said, I couldn't operate my syndicate without this batch of keys. No duplicates, either. I believe in keeping my eggs in one basket, but guarding that basket well."

Gorin selected another key from the bundle and held it up for JC to see. "This key opens a safe deposit box in a Seattle bank that contains a million in greenbacks and gilt-edged bonds, loot of a bank robbery I pulled twenty-odd years ago."

He began ticking off other keys, reminding Tommy of a mother playing "this little pig went to market" on a child's toes:

"This little key opens a bank box in Portland. This is from 'Frisco. This one is to a box in Guadalajara, Mexico. One reason why none of the tough guys in my ring ever get notions to knock me off so they can help themselves to my loot is because they know they can't get at it without the list of phony names I got in my little black book, identifyin' the banks where I rent deposit boxes, and the keys on this ring."

Gorin thrust the keycase into the pocket of the varsity parka and reached out to pull open the lid of the mysterious red box he had just unlocked. JC and Tommy felt a shudder ripple down their backs as they saw the electric clock, the dry cell batteries, and the tubular-shaped objects racked up inside the gangster's red box. It was, they both sensed instantly, a time bomb of some sort.

"My ace in the hole, boys," Gorin chuckled, reaching up to adjust tiny control knobs on the face of the clock. "Like you heard me tell Beachcomber before I had to KO the old gaffer for getting obstreperous—I don't aim to skip the country and leave this ghost ship for the law to find. What the old codger didn't know was that the first week we went into business together, I parked six litres of nitroglycerin in his safe. Told him this red box was full of business records."

Stunned comprehension made JC Ellison's face shine with clammy perspiration. He, more than Tommy or Noisy, knew that six litres of deadly nitroglycerin could blow Spark-Gap's ghost ship to bits.

"I'm setting her to blow in forty minutes," Gorin said, double-checking the settings on the dial of the bomb's timing device against the expensive wristwatch he wore. "Forty minutes; no more, no less. That will give me time to get my launch over at Stackpole Harbor, get down to the slough where my seaplane is waiting, and be on the way."

Uncoiling a red wire that dangled from the infernal machine, Gorin clipped it to a bolt on the door of the safe.

"In case Spark-Gap comes to," Gorin said, "he might want to open the safe and put my bomb out of commission. Tell him if he does, it'll blow up right square in his ugly face. That's why I rigged this trigger wire to the safe door, just in case of electrical failure."

They saw Gorin close the lid of the red box, leaving only the emergency trigger wire exposed. Then, very gingerly, the King of the Safecrackers eased the safe door shut and spun the combination dial to reset the tumblers.

Coming to his feet, Gorin once more tucked his briefcase under his arm. Once more he cocked the Beachcomber's .38 revolver, as he stared down at the old man's sprawled shape at his feet and then around the wireless room at the three human souls he planned to leave behind to await destruction.

"Gorin," JC Ellison chewed out hoarsely, "if you've got an atom of human compassion in that twisted soul of yours, you'll let these two kids go free. Murdering me, I can understand, knowing I'd send you back to life imprisonment if I got the chance. But these boys—with all life ahead of them—what would you gain by killing them?"

Blackjack Gorin rolled the unlighted cigar across his teeth, not in the least chagrined by the detective's scorn.

"They had more to do with drivin' me out of Washington than you did, Ellison, when you look at the facts. They wouldn't have lifted a finger to keep me from goin' back to prison. . . . Nope. You play with fire, you risk gettin' burnt. One thing—it'll be a quick and painless end."

Gorin stepped around the Beachcomber, who was beginning to show signs of returning to consciousness. He stepped over to the door, holding his gun alert for emergencies.

"I'll be airborne when that nitro blows," Gorin said musingly. "The Peninsula makes a pretty sight from ten thousand feet, this time of year. I'll hate to leave, no kiddin'. The bay looks like a puddle of blue paint. There's snow over on the Cascades to the east, and Mount Rainier like an Indian tepee beyond Puget Sound. . . . it's a pretty sight."

Gorin started to step over the coaming of the doorway, and Tommy Rockford chose that moment to act, knowing it was their last possible chance.

Pushing himself away from the iron wall where he had been ordered to stand, Tommy's driving leg-power put him into a football star's flying tackle before Gorin could swing his gun around for a shot.

JC and Noisy gave terrified shouts as they saw flame spurt from the muzzle of Gorin's revolver. But he had fired instinctively, not aiming, and the slug missed the boy's hurtling form to carom off the steep post above JC's head as Tommy's shoulder smashed Gorin in the left hip.

The driving impact of Tommy's hundred and eighty pounds of solid bone and muscle smashed Gorin off his feet and hurtled him backwards through the doorway. The brain-jolting thump of his skull against the iron floor of the electronics laboratory caused Gorin to let go the smoking revolver, momentarily leaving him at Tommy's mercy.

The precious advantage was short-lived, however. Tommy had fallen with his body on top of Gorin, halfway through the wireless room doorway; but before he could hammer a blow at Gorin's exposed face, or even reach for the fallen revolver so near at hand, Gorin equaled the odds.

With catlike dexterity, the little gangster pulled both knees back toward his chest and, straightening them, smashed Tommy in the face with both heels of his hob-nailed boots.

Fireworks exploded in Tommy's brain. He felt the warmth of blood oozing from his lacerated face. Although the kicking boot heels straightened him up, Tommy plunged forward and downward a second time, even as Gorin rolled over and started to rise.

Half blinded, the radio ham reached out and grabbed the thick woolen folds of the football parka Gorin had put on. His pain-numbed brain told him to hang on at all costs, to wrestle with Gorin. When his head cleared, he knew he would more than be a match for the gangster, pound for pound.

But Blackjack Gorin resorted to an escape trick that came instinctively. He was in a sitting position on the laboratory floor when Tommy's hands took their double grip on his parka. Now, by merely leaning forward and putting his arms over his head, Blackjack Gorin had only to lunge his torso backwards to skin the parka inside out.

Too late, Tommy saw what Gorin was up to. He saw the gangster's red hair disappear inside the neck of the parka like a turtle's; saw the sleeves roll inside-out as Gorin pulled his arms free.

Tommy was staring at an empty wad of clothing in his hands when Gorin scooped up the .38 revolver and bounded to his feet. The whole frantic tussle had lasted not more than five seconds.

Panting heavily, Gorin rasped out, "It was a good try, kid. I could pull this trigger, I guess, but it'll be more punishment sweatin' out that explosion with the others. Get back in there."

Tommy came to his feet, still holding the inside-out parka Gorin had shucked as a rattlesnake might shed its skin. His feet were on the inside of the wireless room coaming, and he was standing like that, shaking his head to clear it, when Gorin slammed the thick oaken door shut to knock him back from it.

Tossing the parka to one side, Tommy flung himself on the closed door, but it did not budge. Gorin had locked their prison from the outside, and nothing short of a bulldozer could break through those six-inch-thick hardwood planks.

Faint and dizzy, Tommy fought back an hysterical impulse to start pounding that door with his bare fists. Through the six-inch glass port he saw Gorin pick up the briefcase he had dropped and head across the laboratory to the door that opened on the Beachcomber's escape tunnel.

He saw that door open and close on Gorin. The gangster was not hurrying. He had plenty of time. But he had left Tommy and his companions with only thirty-one minutes to live.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

End of the Vamoose

Tommy turned back to face the others. Two words cawed from his throat as he met JC's eyes: "We're finished."

His uncle glanced reassuringly at Noisy and said, "There's always the chance his bomb won't go off, boys, and we'll be rescued. So don't push the panic button yet awhile."

Noisy's big spaniel-sad eyes caught Tommy's glance and his wink told Tommy that the kid knew the truth. Even if the bomb failed to explode, rescue was impossible. No one knew this ghost ship existed no one knew they were at this end of the peninsula, even. Without food or water, starvation would get them eventually, so the time bomb was actually an instrument of mercy.

The Beachcomber rolled over and sat up, wagging his bloody jaw and fingering his bruised chin under his whiskers.

JC whispered swiftly, "He doesn't know about the time bomb, so don't mention it, boys. No use his suffering any more than he already has, at Gorin's hands."

The boys nodded in agreement, their eyes on the black safe with its implacable, inaccessible enemy waiting inside. Tommy could almost see the sweep-second hand of Gorin's timer swinging around and around the dial of that battery-powered device that would vaporize them into eternity.

The Beachcomber came to his feet with difficulty. Like a sleep-walker, he lurched over to his cobwebby work bench and jerked the dust-covered tarpaulin off what Tommy had assumed to be

miscellaneous junk. He recognized the exposed radio gear as antique apparatus from the era of Marconi, Hertz, DeForrest and Armstrong.

"This is the wireless set I used to send out the first distress signal in Pacific Coast history, friends," the old man wheezed in a sepulchral voice. "'CQD, CQD', that was SOS in them days. . . The old *Vamoose* had sprung a seam an' was founderin' fifty mile off shore, an' the skipper had ordered all hands to the boats."

Spark-Gap's crooning recital seemed to hypnotize Tommy Rockford. He found himself drawing nearer to the radio bench.

"I wouldn't desert my ship," Spark-Gap whispered in the ghostly tones of a man reliving the past. "I lashed myself to that stanchion you're handcuffed to, Mr. Ellison. I tapped out 'CQD, CQD *Vamoose*' on this very key. . ."

Tommy stared down at the antique wireless transmitter, losing sight of the peril of their own predicament in a radio ham's curious wonder at seeing gear from a long-forgotten era.

He recognized the heavy spark gap with its silver electrodes, the spiderweb coils, the tuning helix of copper ribbons with wires clipped to it to establish the distress calling frequency of yesteryear. He saw the Beachcomber's gnarled old fingers close lovingly, caressingly on the hard rubber knob of an old-fashioned telegraph key with a green marble base. The receiving set had a catwhisker detector and a Murdock variocoupler with green silk insulation on the windings. All the equipment was mounted neatly on a dust-covered mahogany breadboard with heavy square bus bars, the silver black-tarnished with age.

"Too bad you can't fire up this rig and send another SOS," Tommy heard himself saying. "I got in a jam last winter and called for help by keying a grid-dip oscillator. I put out an SOS at midnight."*

He heard Noisy Noyce make a game, if feeble joke: "Sure, if that old spark gap was in workin' order you could put out a signal that would knock out every TV set on the Peninsula. Leave it on, and sooner or later our TVI committee would track us down!"

The Beachcomber turned a hurt look on Noisy.

"You think my equipment isn't in working order, after all these years?" the old man flared indignantly. "It works as well as the day I assembled it. In the old days at sea my power supply was a bank

*See *SOS at Midnight*, ARRL, 1985

of wet batteries, of course, and they're gone now. But I can put out better than two kilowatts, hooking her up to my generator below decks. Don't have an antenna of course, so I couldn't actually put out a signal, but that's all I'd need."

More to get their mind off their impending fate than anything else, Tommy suggested jokingly, "How about a demonstration, Beachie? I've never seen a real old-time spark gap transmitter in operation."

The Beachcomber muttered "Sure, sure," and squatted down to reach under the workbench and throw a knife switch to the "on" position, feeding power to the antique wireless gear.

A disturbing thought flashed through Tommy's brain—it was entirely possible that a radio signal from that spark-gap rig could touch off the high explosive planted in the *Vamoose* safe, at this close range. Well, if that happened, they'd never know it.

Spark-Gap Gallagher reached for the rubber knob of his telegraph key. Closing the heavy silver contacts caused a bolt of miniature lightning to leap the air space between the electrodes of the heavy-duty spark gap. The crackling roar broke up into copyable dots and dashes, the eerie flicker of the electricity putting a ghastly green glow in the room as the old man tapped out the Morse characters CQD, the SOS call of a bygone day. But without an antenna, no one on the outside would hear that call.

Noisy Noyce pressed hard against JC, his arms around the detective's shoulder. When the Beachcomber stopped transmitting, the boy's choked sob sounded loud in the silence.

"Now look here, kiddo," JC spoke reassuringly, his lips close to Noisy's ear. "This is no way to act."

"I ain't a coward," Noisy choked, "but I'm ascairt to die."

"Listen to me." JC's infinitely tender words reached Tommy's ears above the mumbling of the demented wireless operator at his side. "Years back, I taught my little son Wally a 'Prayer of Protection' to say whenever he got scared. He was barely able to talk, but he learned that prayer. I'd like to teach it to you. How about it? Want to hear it?"

Noisy seemed to drink strength from JC's words. "I never prayed a prayer—in my life," he whispered. "But I'll—try—if you want me to."

Tommy Rockford's eyes misted over as he heard his uncle say,

"It isn't cowardly to pray when—when things are like they are with us, Noisy. Now here is the prayer I taught my little boy. I like to think that he repeated it . . . that night of the auto crash . . . It goes like this:

"The light of God surrounds me; the love of God enfolds me; the power of God protects me; the presence of God watches over me. Wherever I am, God is." JC's voice went husky. "That means He can be in the wireless room of a ghost ship under the beach, Noisy, the same as He can be in a big cathedral. If you can say that prayer, and really mean it, you won't be afraid. Especially since—we're all—going to Him side by side."

It was not until Noisy Noyce had repeated the supplication word for word after JC that Tommy got his inspiration. Striding across the wireless room, he stooped to snatch up the parka he had jerked off Blackjack Gorin's back. Then he cried out,

"Noisy, you don't know it, but your prayer has already been answered! I just happen to remember about something I saw Blackjack Gorin slip into the pocket of this parka, just before he went to work setting his time bomb."

As he spoke, Tommy's rummaging hand came out of the parka and held something up for them all to see. It was Gorin's kangaroo-leather key case.

"You heard what he told us, Unk!" Tommy said, his voice rising to a shout, so great was his excitement. "All his eggs in one basket—he couldn't run his operation without these keys!"

A puzzled frown touched JC's face.

"It may mean that Gorin will lose all his ill-gotten loot, sure—but that won't help us any. It won't keep that bomb from going off, Gorin forgetting he'd put his key case in that parka he left behind."

Tommy yelled, "Don't you see, Unk? *He'll come back for these keys*, if he discovers it in time. And when he does—we'll be ready for him!"

JC shook his head. "Granted he might come back for them, Tommy—but when he sticks his head through that door he'll have a gun in his hand. He'd shoot all four of us in cold blood to get those keys back."

Tommy thrust the key case into his own pocket.

"He won't get a chance to use his gun, Unk!" Tommy cried, a scheme beginning to shape up in his brain now. "I'll knock him cuckoo with a jolt of electricity when he opens the door—a kilowatt of RF

from the Beachcomber's spark-gap transmitter!"

The whole idea had bloomed full-grown in Tommy Rockford's head now. He saw JC scowling puzzledly, but he knew from the sudden chuckle behind the Beachcomber's beard that the old man knew how feasible the scheme was.

"Noisy, get over to the window and keep an eye on the tunnel door," Tommy ordered, rushing back to the Beachcomber's wireless gear. "I figure Gorin will catch on that he left his keys behind when he goes to switch on his motorboat engine at Stackpole Harbor. He'll know he's got plenty of time to get back here and recover the keys and still reach safety long before the time bomb goes off. You tell me the instant you see him coming."

A high-pitched cackle escaped the Beachcomber. "He'll be back, right enough. Them keys are the only ones he's got. That's why he kept 'em in my safe all along."

Noisy Noyce, stationing himself at the six-inch porthole in the connecting door, saw Tommy and the Beachcomber start unwinding wire from a coil of Number 12 copper cable which, in years gone by, had been the lead-in of Spark-Gap Gallagher's wireless antenna.

"How is this going to work?" Noisy wanted to know, a vibrant note of hope replacing the terror in his voice. "Did my prayer take care of that okay?"

Tommy was already running a wire from the helix of the spark-gap transmitter under the bench and along one wall.

"I'm going to hook up Beachcomber's wireless outfit to the brass doorknob on that door," Tommy explained his scheme. "If Gorin comes back, I'll wait until he gets the door unlocked. Then when he twists the knob I'll close the wireless key. That'll give him a shock that will paralyze him, freeze his muscles so he can't let go."

The Beachcomber cut in venomously, "Hold that key down long enough, the current passin' through his wet shoes to the grounded iron hull of the *Vamoose*, and ventricular fibrillation will set in—that's muscular spasm of the heart..."

Tommy was unreeling the antenna wire along the bulkhead now, toward the door. "I don't want to electrocute him and have a murder on my conscience the rest of my life," K6ATX said. "A quick jolt of juice will knock him out, though, enough for me to get his gun. But keep out of its line of fire while the current is on! And then—"

"I'll electrocute him for you!" offered the Beachcomber. "He

don't deserve to be took alive, not even to go back to the penitentiary."

Tommy fished a jackknife out of his pocket, opened it to the screwdriver blade, and loosened the set-screw in the brass doorknob. He wrapped many turns of the antenna wire around the knob, with one loop around the set-screw so it could be tightened for a good electrical connection, while Uncle JC explained a few facts to the old man. "I don't blame you for feeling vindictive, Spark-Gap, but the FCC and the FBI will have a lot of questions to ask Gorin about his sea-going pirate ring, you know. With the code book in his briefcase, and those keys to bank-vault boxes all over the country, we'll be pretty well set, but we want to take him alive and let the law do the punishing."

The wire was ready. Tommy traced it back to the helix of the spark-gap wireless rig, making sure all was in readiness.

"Now listen, everybody!" Tommy said, glancing at his watch. "We've only got...let's see, seventeen minutes to go before blast-off time. If Gorin does come back, he'll look through the window to make sure everything's like it was. He'll see Unk still handcuffed, of course, and Beachcomber, you'd better lie down on the deck like you hadn't regained consciousness yet, and Noisy, you squat down beside your new father there, and I'll be over at the bench pretending to be studying the old wireless gear—handy to Spark-Gap Gallagher's radio key."

All took their appointed places. Minutes, which had been speeding by, suddenly slowed to a snail's pace. Tommy moved over to the door to keep an eye on the laboratory outside, as if by sheer willpower he could make Gorin open the tunnel door.

When only ten minutes remained—the limit Tommy had mentally set for Gorin's coming back, if he was coming back—he began to give up hope. At eight minutes, he saw JC Ellison shake his head, indicating that his deadline had passed.

"Maybe I'd better pray again." Noisy broke the silence for the first time since the electric trap had been readied. "I had beginner's luck last time, and—"

At that instant Tommy saw the tunnel door swing open, like a scene in a silent movie, and saw Blackjack Gorin's shirt-sleeved figure striding across the ghost ship cabin.

"Here he comes!" Tommy gasped, ducking out of view and fairly flying back to his station at the radio key. He whispered the words,

although the soundproof bulkhead would have kept even a gunshot from reaching Gorin's ears out in the laboratory.

Tommy took a quick look at the big switch under the bench, to make positive the wireless transmitter of long ago was ready to fire up. Everything depended on split-second timing, from here on; there was no margin for mistakes. Shock Gorin too soon, and he might not get the door unlocked. Hold the paralyzing radio frequency charge on too long, and it might kill him.

Tommy shrank into the shadow of the iron pillar as he saw Blackjack Gorin's malevolent, sweat-slick face framed momentarily in the round window of the oaken door. Gorin's shuttling green eyes were satisfied by what they saw, a tableau of four human beings waiting for the sands of time to run out on them: the Beachcomber sprawled on the deck near the safe, JC Ellison helpless in his steel bracelets at the foot of the stanchion, with the orphan boy Noisy Noyce clinging to him; Tommy Rockford seemingly engrossed in the old-time wireless outfit of the *Vamoose* at the bench across the room.

Gorin's face disappeared, and Tommy's mental countdown began.

He heard the click of the lock. He saw the brass knob twisting, lifting the wire which was invisible from Gorin's angle of vision.

Tommy saw the door start to open, heard Gorin start to speak: "It's lucky I discovered in time that I'd—"

Tommy pressed the radio key then, the same radio key that had flashed the first distress signal from a ship ever heard on the Washington coast, more than half a century before.

A lightning-bolt flashed between the electrodes of the wireless spark gap, filling the room with a green witch-glow, deafening their ears with its malignant crackling thunder.

Blackjack Gorin, poised in the half-open doorway, jerked rigid. The .38 revolver clutched in his right hand exploded simultaneously with a roar that filled the little room, firing its slug harmlessly into the floor. The fingers of Gorin's left hand were frozen in paralysis to the brass doorknob, as high-voltage RF coursed through his body to ground for a fraction of a second.

Tommy released the key; he had held it down hardly for the duration of a Morse dash, but the gun fell with a clatter from Gorin's nerveless fingers. The Beachcomber scrambled for the fallen gun, but Tommy reached it first and probably saved Blackjack Gorin from being pumped full of bullets as he stood there, no longer in the grip of an

electronic monster from radio's Stone Age, but seemingly too stunned to move.

"Noisy—get Unk's handcuff keys, in there on the bench by the big oscilloscope!" Tommy yelled, thrusting the revolver muzzle into Gorin's ribs. "Hurry, hurry!"

A matter of moments later, Blackjack Gorin's brain began to grope back from its shocked state, in time for him to see Noisy working, with trembling hands, to unlock the steel fetters that held JC Ellison a prisoner to the iron stanchion.

"Now let's get out of here," were JC's first words when he had finished shackling the Beachcomber's right wrist to Gorin's left wrist. "We've got to be above ground when Gorin's blast goes off, because every tunnel roof in the area will collapse."

Gorin did not offer any resistance, but the Beachcomber reached out to grab hold of an iron stanchion as they were heading across the laboratory for the exit tunnel.

"I want to die with my ship—the same as I did long ago when I thought she was founderin' at sea!" begged the old man. "I want to die with the *Vamoose*—with my life's work around me."

But the demented old man was powerless to resist being dragged bodily out of the ghost ship by Tommy Rockford.

Later, Tommy's memory of their passage through the escape tunnel and their climbing the iron ladder to the Pillbox trapdoor was a hazy, disconnected series of images. All he wanted to remember was that moment when they unbarred the Pillbox door and lurched out into the sunshine and felt the cool salt wind on their faces and the music of the ocean once again in their ears.

By Tommy's reckoning, they still had four minutes left to the blast's deadline. None of them turned his eyes westward, toward the whitened tangle of beach driftwood marking the grave of the *Vamoose*. Of one accord, the five of them hurried into the cool shadows of the forest trail leading to the Powerhouse.

They had just come in sight of JC's maroon station wagon when the explosion came.

They felt it as a sharp jolt under their shoe soles, as if the earth had been riven to its very core. Then came the shock wave of sound, like nails being hammered into their eardrums, and the after-temblors caused by the collapsing tunnels of Leadbetter Fort.

The Beachcomber gave a sharp, poignant cry, which none of them

heard. Then, the brightness of the sky was obscured for a time by a malignant geyser of smoke and sand and flaming debris that climbed like an A-bomb mushroom to the zenith.

Only a smoke-fuming crater between the meander line and the surf marked where a ghost ship and a misguided scientist's life work had been erased between one clock-tick and the next.

When the shackled prisoners were in the station wagon, Noisy looked down at his toes and murmured to JC Ellison, "That game we were playin'—about me calling you Dad, and stuff—I ain't holding you to that, Mr. Ellison. You didn't mean it really."

JC reached down and bodily lifted Noisy into the front seat.

"Wally," he said exultantly, "you lost your real dad and I lost my little son at about the same time. We need each other. We've got a lot of time to make up, you and I."

It was hard to say who was the happier, JC or Noisy Noyce.

Tommy walked slowly back to his car after JC had started back to Ocean Park. His mood turned somber, not because he was worrying about what Blackjack Gorin's fate would be in prison, for he had earned society's retribution. But Tommy couldn't help hoping that old Spark-Gap, alias the Beachcomber, would be treated leniently at the bar of justice. Maybe in the few years left to him he could impart some of his electronics know-how to American science.

Climbing into his car, Tommy switched on his ham rig. Revving up the engine, he thought, "Day before yesterday at this time I was still on the ferry crossing over from Canada."

The minute he got home he intended to flop into bed and sleep the clock around. In the weeks to come, with no Gorin case to occupy him, all he had to do was swim and fish and loaf and work ham radio and discuss college dates with Trudy.

He remembered Trudy's saying she kept her home receiver tuned to the local ten-meter calling frequency. This was supertime; maybe she was listening now. He hoped so. The news wouldn't keep about Noisy Noyce finding himself a new father.

He gave K6ZNT a long call on 29,550 kilohertz. He had no sooner released his press-to-talk button when Trudy's warm and eager voice came from the speaker under the dash:

"Hi, there, K6ATX/7! This is K6ZNT, fixed-portable-seven, in Ocean Park, Washington, returning... Anything new, Tommy?"

"Well," K6ATX drawled, "yes—I would say so. So pull up your

easy chair while I make with the modulation, huh?"

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Author's Note

Since the first book of Tommy Rockford's ham radio adventures was published under the title *SOS at Midnight*, I have received hundreds of letters from readers, half of them licensed hams, the other half would-be hams wanting to know how to get started in this fascinating scientific hobby.

To the latter I say, in effect: If possible, talk with a radio ham in your home town, or a ham radio equipment dealer. He can tell you how to learn the Morse Code and study up on basic electronics theory so as to pass your Novice Class examination for the FCC (Federal Communications Commission) and get on the air with your own Amateur Radio station. In any event, you should write to the hams' non-profit organization, the American Radio Relay League, asking for their free packet of beginner information. The address of the ARRL is 225 Main St., Newington, CT 06111.

Scores of readers have written to tell me that thanks to *SOS at Midnight* they have become licensed hams, which of course makes me very happy; and I hope the same will be true of those who have read *CQ Ghost Ship!*

Those of you who have just finished reading this book may find yourselves taking a radio license test very soon. Good luck to you. Try to remember that in this push-button age, Uncle Sam is more than ever eager to have his nephews and nieces acquire proficiency in such things as electronics.

Amateur Radio is not intended just for fun, however. The available space in the electromagnetic spectrum is limited, and our "ham bands"—the space on the air allotted to amateurs in the USA by international agreement—are coveted by the users of commercial

radio gear—taxicabs and trucks, police and military vehicles, and the like.

If the hams of America are going to continue to hold their space in the crowded medium of radio waves, they must earn it—not with ragchewing, but with public service and experimentation. In times of disaster—floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, forest fires—American communities have come to depend on the radio hams to help out with emergency communications.

As radio hams, we must all remember our hobby is a privilege, not a right. Good luck to all of you—hope to BCNU on the air soon! With vy 73,

WALKER A. TOMPKINS, K6ATX

About the Author

Walker A. Tompkins spent his childhood vacations at the Ocean Park beach of *CQ Ghost Ship!* When he wrote his first published story, at age twenty-one, he was living in The Wreckage log cabin owned by the mysterious Beachcomber in this story.

In 1952, the Federal Communications Commission issued to Mr. Tompkins an Amateur Radio operator's license with the station call K6ATX, which he bestowed on the hero of this book. His first Tommy Rockford ham radio novel, *SOS at Midnight*, has brought fan letters from hams in every state and many foreign lands, and is one of the hobby's all-time fiction favorites.

During his writing career, Mr. Tompkins has traveled all over the world, with Egypt, Italy and Japan being his favorite spots. During World War II, he was an Army correspondent in Europe.

The father of a son and two daughters, he now resides in Santa Barbara, California, where he is best known for his books on local history and biography. He is a past president of the Santa Barbara Amateur Radio Club, and founding editor of its newspaper, *Key-Klix*.

His greatest honor in the field of ham radio came in 1958, when he was selected out of 180,000 American ham operators to write about Amateur Radio around the world for the *National Geographic Magazine*. Over 100,000 copies of his *Ham Radio for the Whole Family*, official brochure of the American Radio Relay League, have been distributed at hobby fairs and hamfests. He has also written about ham radio for *Parents Magazine* and *Popular Electronics*.

Mr. Tompkins says, "If you should visit the North Beach area in Washington State where *CQ Ghost Ship!* is laid, be sure to ask at Ocean Park for directions on how to find the sunken ghost ship *Solano*, near the Oysterville beach approach. It was that relic which provided the idea for this book.

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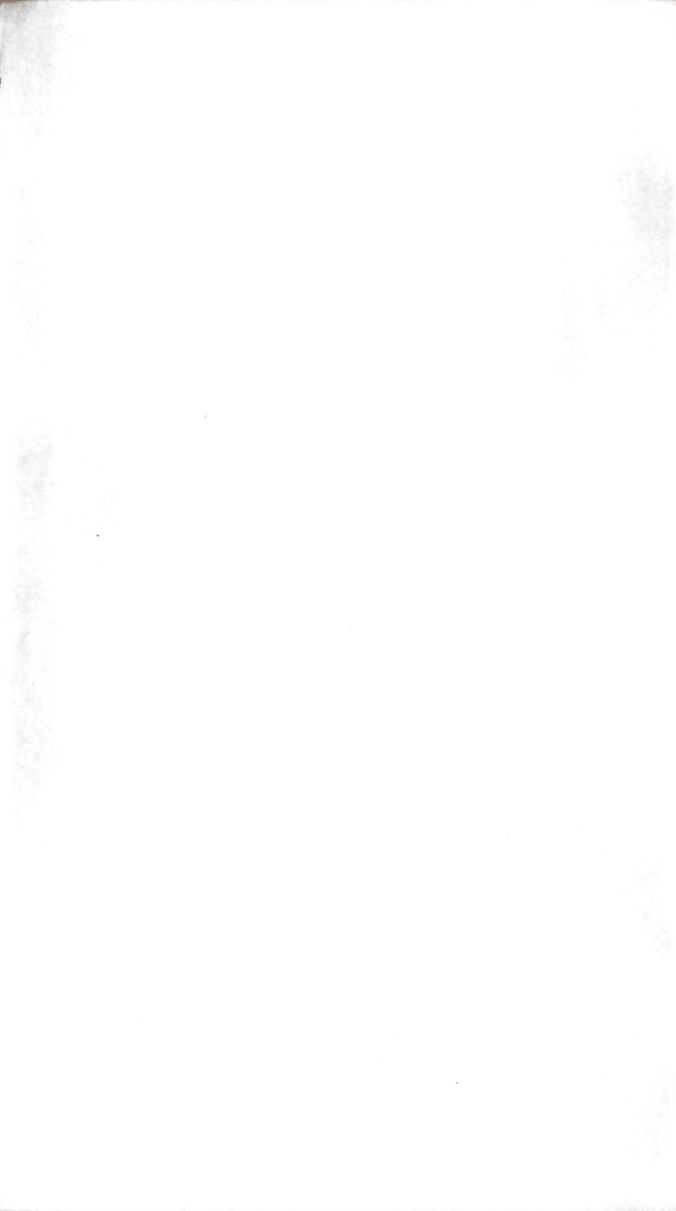
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Tommy Rockford, K6ATX is back on the trail of high adventure! ARRL is proud to bring back updated versions of Walker Tompkins' exciting classics plus a **brand-new** thriller: **Death Valley QTH**. Newcomers and oldtimers alike will find it impossible to put these books down. They are written in a style that will spark an interest in Amateur Radio among unlicensed persons as well.

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